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Conceptualizations of Gender in Buddhist Tantra

by

Danielle Jean Lefebvre

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

in

Religious Studies

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Date submitted: 20 June 2003

University of Alberta

Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled "Conceptualizations of Gender in Buddhist Tantra" submitted by Danielle Jean Lefebvre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Religious Studies.

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Abstract

In this thesis I suggest that any investigation into the status of historical female practitioners in Tantric Buddhism must incorporate an understanding of gender that challenges the image of women in Tantra as idealized constructions, and not as evidence of historical practices. I propose a new historiographical model that incorporates feminist theoretical discussions of gender as a category of analysis in order to examine the idealized images of Tantra as discursive constructions. This model is developed through a critique of Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment*, a study of women in the historical Tantric tradition that relies exclusively on the idealized images of Tantra's religious imagination in order to draw conclusions on the lives of the tradition's female practitioners.

Dedication

To my mother, Theresa.

Preface

In my transliteration of Sanskrit words, I have chosen to include only the diacritical marks that indicate the gender of each word (marked vowels). Tibetan words and titles are transliterated according to Wylie's "A Standard System of Tibetan Transcription."

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Introduction

Feminist studies in religion began as a powerful force through which the traditional framework of religious studies was challenged. As Valerie Saiving observed in a paper originally published in 1960, "I am no longer as certain as I once was that, when theologians speak of 'man,' that they are using the word in its generic sense. It is, after all, a well-known fact that theology has been written almost exclusively by men" (25). Beginning with the realization that male theology did not speak to women's experiences of religion, the feminist movement in religion developed into a critique of textual interpretation, women's access to leadership roles, and male language, by way of this initial observation that male dominated religious studies had largely only examined religious life as it pertains to male culture. Feminist scholars in religion set out to challenge both the interpretive lens and the content of study itself. This early movement can be broadly categorized by two areas of study. The first, instigated by scholars such as Saiving (1991 [1960]), Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (1984, 1991), and Judith Plaskow (1994), among others, sought a "usable past" within which to locate women's contributions in the history of religious traditions. Fiorenza (1991), like Saiving, notes that scholars overlook the roles of women because they continue to translate texts into "masculinized language" and interpret them "from a patriarchal perspective" (86). Thus she returns to the very same texts in order challenge the androcentric perspective and find evidence of women's many contributions. She later develops her own search for a usable past in Christianity into a new interpretive model, a feminist hermeneutics, that

> seeks to develop a critical dialectical mode of biblical interpretation that can do justice to women's experiences of the Bible as a thoroughly

> patriarchal book written in androcentric language as well as to women's experiences of the Bible as a source of empowerment and vision in our struggles for liberation. (1984, xiii)

In this feminist theological enterprise, the search for a religious past that includes women as active participants includes also a type of revisionism for the purposes of the practice of religion today. This is illustrated by Judith Plaskow (1991), when she asks, "how [might] the central Jewish categories of Torah, Israel, and God change as women appropriate them through the lens of our experience (x)"? Thus the "discovery" of women's history alters the way in which religious texts and practices are interpreted today.

The study of goddess traditions and of female deities developed as a second area of feminist scholarship. The interest in the goddess or goddesses resulted from concerns regarding the marginalization of feminine symbols in mainstream religious traditions, and also with the potential for feminine symbols of the divine to empower women. As Mary Daly (1974) wrote, in a now infamous observation, "Since 'God' is male, the male is God. God the Father legitimates all earthly God-Fathers" (21), Carol Christ, in "Why Women Need the Goddess" (1991 [1979]) and *Rebirth of the Goddess* (1997), argues that women's spiritual paths would be expanded with the development of a "the*a*logy" based on women's experiences of the divine:

> The simplest and most basic meaning of Goddess is the acknowledgement of the legitimacy of female power as a beneficent and independent power [...] the divine principle, the saving and sustaining power, is in herself, that she will no longer look to men or male figures as saviors. The strength

> and independence of female power can be intuited by contemplating ancient and contemporary images of the Goddess. (1991 [1979], 277)

Thus new directions were born within the academic study of religion. Along with these new interpretive models came specific assumptions and theoretical perspectives that challenged traditional androcentric scholarship. One such assumption was an understanding that contemporary scholars can speak to or access the experiences of historical women, by way of sacred texts and literature, in order to give insight into their roles and contributions that had up to this point been marginalized in traditional accounts of religious life. There was often also an underlying supposition that women enjoyed common experiences and needs. For instance, according to Christ, women *need* the Goddess, or they need at least to understand the divine as feminine in order for religion to address their experiences *as women*.

Feminist scholarship in Buddhism has also challenged the traditional androcentric framework of religious studies, however; discussions are often heavily focused on the challenges of examining an Eastern tradition through the lens of Western feminist interpretive models.[1] Yet feminist inquiries into the status of women in Buddhist cultures often continue to seek for a usable Buddhist past informed by women's experiences, suggesting, although sometimes only implicitly, that despite the tradition's ideological rejection of the categories "man" and "woman," women's experiences of Buddhism must be addressed. Tsultrim Allione (1984) for example, has compiled a collection of biographies on the lives of female yoginīs and gurus in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition to illustrate the active role of women throughout the tradition's history. She too, like Carol

[1] For dialogue between Western feminist theory and Buddhism, see Anne C. Klein's examination of feminist notions of identity and Buddhist understanding of the self in *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen*, 1995.

Christ, distinguishes between the needs and experiences of male and female practitioners in their access to teachings and identification with a *yidam*, or meditation deity (37). Similarly, Anne Klein, in "Primordial Purity and Everyday Life: Exalted Female Symbols and the Women of Tibet" (1985), asks critical questions regarding the status of women in Tibetan Buddhism through her analysis of historical and mythic female figures such as Aya Khandro and Yeshey Tsogyal. Klein also briefly calls attention to the disparity between the exalted images of the feminine and the sometimes secondary status of Tibetan women. Diana Paul asks similar questions in her research into the Mahāyāna tradition in *Women in Buddhism* (1979); however, she is primarily concerned with the conflicting perspectives on women *within* the texts themselves[2]. Others, such as Karma Lekse Tsomo (1989, 1999) have emphasized the great potential for women in Buddhist spiritual practices on account of Buddhist ideology that makes no distinction between male and female at the level of practice. According to Tsomo, there are no barriers to women's practice in the tradition, even when cultural barriers do exist (1989, 85). This notion that Buddhism, at the level of ideology, offers female practitioners an equal position on the religious path, is flourishing in contemporary scholarship[3].

So too does Miranda Shaw (1994) aim to rediscover the lives of women in Indian Tantric Buddhism and to locate women's practice in what she identifies as Tantra's unique "gynocentric balance" (68). In *Passionate Enlightenment*, Shaw fiercely rejects traditional androcentric accounts of women's status in the Tantric tradition. Looking to the images of female deities, Shaw suggests that

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[2] See Lucinda Joy Peach's "Social Responsibility, Sex Change, and Salvation: Gender Justice in the *Lotus Sutra*" (2002), for a recent analysis of gender as it is presented in Mahayana literature.
[3] See, for example, Judith Zimmer Brown's *The Dakini's Warm Breath* (2002) and Rita Gross's *Buddhism After Patriarchy* (1993).

> These female figures, with their exuberant air of passion and freedom, communicate a sense of mastery and spiritual power. They inspired my initial interest in the Tantric tradition and served as the lodestar of my explorations throughout. It seemed to me that the yoginis who grace Tantric literature and gaze so compellingly from paintings and statuary may provide evidence of the women of Tantric Buddhism – their historical existence, spiritual liberation, and religious insights" (3).

Shaw's research draws on the two insights from previous feminist scholarship in religion. First, she seeks a history for the female Tantric practitioners that have been marginalized in traditional historical accounts. The evidence, according to Shaw, comes from these literary and visual images that inspired her investigation into the tradition. Closely connected to Shaw's search for a usable past is her pursuit to identify how Tantric theory celebrates and honours the spiritual capabilities and experiences of women. Like the feminist scholars before her, Shaw offers a history of Tantra according to its female practitioners.

In this thesis I suggest that any investigation into the status of historical female practitioners in Tantric Buddhism must incorporate an understanding of *gender* that challenges the images of women in Tantra as idealized constructions, and not as evidence of historical practice. That is, when one proposes to study the women of Tantra, how does one ensure that one is accessing the reality of historical female practitioners and not the tradition's idealized images of women? What we do have access to is gender, the constructions that function together to create the "women" of Tantra, and in an analysis of the historical tradition, these constructions are available to us primarily through

literature. I am concerned that it is this constructed "woman" of Tantra that scholars, such as Shaw, are relying upon in order to examine the lives of female practitioners. Instead, to study gender implies a desire to identify the processes that construct "woman" or "feminine" and to understand how these constructed categories inform corresponding ideals. It for this reason that Ursula King (1995) brings attention to the space between "women" of a tradition's religious imagination, where women or the feminine principle are held in high esteem or occupy an exalted status, and the often secondary status of female practitioners (2). Because this disparity between the idealized images and the secondary status seems to exist in the Tantric tradition, the goal of a critical analysis of gender in Tantra is to understand the processes active in this "space" which serve to maintain this distinction between ideals and female practitioners.

In the first chapter I introduce Miranda Shaw's project in *Passionate Enlightenment* and suggest how an examination into the status of women in Tantra might occur in light of contemporary feminist theoretical perspectives on gender as a category of analysis. Here I rely primarily on an understanding of gender as defined by Joan Scott (1986), who argues that feminist historians should be concerned with gender, as a "constitutive element," as it functions to produce the subjects of our historical inquiries (1067). That is, the "women" of our analyses are constructed by the interaction of forces such as cultural symbols, normative values through which we interpret these symbols, and the social, political, and religious institutions that support both the symbols and our subsequent interpretations. Thus, an examination into the status of women in Tantric history is incomplete when it is based only on an idealized construction. Thus, in the second chapter I return to *Passionate Enlightenment*, and to Shaw's textual evidence, in

order to illustrate how it is Shaw's vague understanding of gender as a category of analysis that allows her reading of the literature to serve as evidence of women's religious life in Tantric history. In an alternative reading of Shaw's textual examples, I return to *tantras* and other sacred literature and suggest that Shaw fails to consider these examples as idealized constructions which cannot serve as the foundation of historical evidence. For example, I argue that the women or images of the feminine in the *Candamahārosana-tantra* and the *siddha* narratives, while often enjoying an exalted status, occupy such a status for the benefit of male religious practice. Whereas Shaw assumes that these images reflect the many roles of women in the historical tradition, I suggest that these *idealized* constructions tell us more about Tantric discourses and ideologies than they do about the lives of female practitioners. Finally, in the third chapter, I suggest a direction for a new model of analysis that develops Scott's understanding of gender in order to assess Shaw's evidence of women in Tantra. My project in this thesis is not to arrive at a conclusive picture of women's participation in Tantra, nor am I interested in restating the conclusions of earlier androcentric scholarship and suggest that women were the mere "handmaidens" (Snellgrove 150) of male tantrics. Instead my goal is to point to the limitations of some feminist models in religious studies, and in particular, the use of these models in the study of Tantric Buddhism.

One such limitation comes from the complexity of studying "women," since the category represents a multitude of discourses and processes that combine to construct the ideal figure "woman." When this "woman" becomes the subject of an inquiry, feminist or other, without a solid theoretical awareness of the complexities of gender, it risks the possibility of accessing only the idealized construction. A new model of critical analysis

for the study of gender in Tantric Buddhism, while sharing some of the same limitations inherent to any historical project (such as having to rely on ancient texts and other sacred literature), must begin to look *beyond* the idealized images of women and the feminine principle as its primary point of departure.

Chapter One: Theoretical considerations

In her introduction to a collection of essays on feminist studies in religion, Ursula King (1995) calls for scholars to pay closer attention to the role of gender. She argues that

> [M]any religions are rich in feminine imagery and symbolism but the symbolic ascendancy of the feminine often goes with a social denigration and low status of women in everyday life. Thus one must clearly distinguish between the place given to women in the world of religious imagination and that accorded to them in the actual world of religious life. These often stand in an inverse relationship to each other and remain poles apart. (16)

The "religious imagination" of Tantric Buddhism abounds with such images of the feminine. If we take King's warning seriously, then we must approach the images and teachings within Tantra, which at first glance may appear to celebrate women and the feminine principle, with a critical eye. When faced with the vivid images of Tārā seated in meditation, or Vajrayoginī in an ecstatic dance, one may be led to believe that women hold as high a position in real practice as they do in this visual imagery and textual description. Yet before such a conclusion is reached, one must first grapple with the reality that women practitioners today, the inheritors of such imagery, appear to have no such exalted status. We are faced with a radical polarity between "woman" within traditional discourse, and real "women" involved in the practice of the tradition.

King points to a distinct elevation of some kind of feminine principle or eternal "woman" within religious traditions across cultures, yet she proposes that scholars of religion examine such images concurrently with the discordant marginalization of real

women. In my own study into the status of women in Tantric Buddhism, I use King's statement as a point of departure from which to open up a discussion of contemporary feminist approaches to the study of religious traditions. First, if we follow King's suggestion, and incorporate into it an understanding of gender as a product of cultural discourses, often formed under conditions of male dominance, we could examine the possibility that the "woman" of Tantra's religious imagination is a contradictory product of such discourse. Perhaps, then, the religious imagination is a culmination of *constructed* ideals of the feminine, and not necessarily a reflection of women's participation in the tradition.

Second, through a better understanding of "gender" as a category of analysis (in Joan Scott's phrase), I hope to present a methodological approach that both recognizes the tension between the religious imagination and the marginalization of real women, and suggests a way for scholars to utilize Western feminist theory to situate this dichotomy within the larger context of the cultural construction of categories like "the feminine" and "the masculine." I wish in no way to deny the contributions made by female practitioners of Tantric Buddhism, both historically and in the living tradition, but instead I offer King's observation as a warning against methodological approaches that accept the idealized images of women, woman, and the feminine without a critical analysis.

The Urgency of Critical Analysis

Modern scholarship in the study of women in Tantric Buddhism reveals a trend towards an uncritical acceptance of both the tradition's picture of "woman" and its historical depiction of female Tantric practitioners. In response to the dominant androcentric scholarship of the past, which either ignored or disregarded women's

religious practice, some contemporary scholars are searching for evidence of women within the tradition without fully grasping the theoretical problems surrounding ideals of sexual difference or the historiographical challenges inherent in trying to identify the religious practice of historical female practitioners. While the work of scholars such as Karma Lekse Tsomo (1989), Rita Gross (1993), and Miranda Shaw (1994), has shed new light on historical evidence of women's religious lives through the translation of texts, the retelling of sacred stories, and insight into modern practice, it lacks the critical analysis that feminist theoretical discussions of the role of gender could provide. The reality of female practitioners creates a sense of political urgency to these issues: the tradition has not officially reinstated women's full ordination since its disappearance at the end of the first millennium, there exists virtually no female lineage of those Tantric practitioners one would expect from women's "presence" in the tradition, and women's religious practice is often hidden behind the very public practice of male Buddhists[4].

The research of Miranda Shaw in *Passionate Enlightenment* (1994) is an example of a methodological approach that ignores the tension between Tantra's religious imagination and the status of real practitioners. Shaw offers images and textual descriptions as evidence of women's participation and status within the tradition. She argues that women have enjoyed a respected position in Tantra, which exists in a "relationship of complementarity and mutuality" with male practitioners (11). Examining textual imagery from India and Tibet, she argues that "it does not follow that women were the impassive objects of male observation or subjugation [and] since these texts were not created by men in isolation of women, they do not express exclusively male

[4] See, for example, Shaw's description of the challenges she faced trying to access the secret, esoteric teachings regarding women, in *Passionate Enlightenment*, 1994, 14-19.

views" (36). In other words, she proposes that the presence of the feminine ideal is a direct representation of real women within the tradition, or more simply, these images could not have been born without women's participation.

Shaw is committed to rejecting certain traditional androcentric methods of scholarship – such as the work of David Snellgrove (1987) and Mircea Eliade (1958) – and she makes certain theoretical assumptions in order to present Tantra as a tradition in which women flourished as equal participants. In contrast to those scholars who have often assumed that women were absent from most areas of religious life, she suggests that by "assuming the subjectivity of women with regard to their own lives and their possession of intrinsic motivations for their actions, [my] approach to the sources has been different" (197). Shaw explicitly distances herself from what she understands as a trend in scholarship to assume the existence of patriarchy, and the subsequent marginalization of women, across cultures. "Denials of the positive roles, status, and achievements of women in this movement, she argues, "have several points of departure. They would appear to be part of a trend identified by Veena Das in many fields of historical study" (196). According to Das (1990), "the study of other cultures continues to be undertaken from the perspective of providing documentation of the universality of oppression against women" (218). Shaw chooses instead a historiographical model that views women as active participants in the traditions, a model that does not support the dominant perspective that women's oppression is universal. Shaw writes that "the interpretive principles I have found most useful are those put forward in the context of feminist historiography, particularly in the work of Gerda Lerner, Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Joan Scott" (12). I argue that Shaw misreads Scott's model of historical

analysis in particular, manipulating the reconstructive agendas of feminist historians in order to present her textual analysis as evidence of women's exalted status in Tantric history. Consequently, she reverses the findings of the androcentric interpretive models she initially challenges. Modern scholarship, Shaw argues, has assumed that when Tantric texts do not generally refer to women, then "women are not the referents of statements in the Tantric text" (75). Yet Shaw's own argument is based on a similar assumption. She argues that because texts and iconographic images *do* point to the lives of women and to the tradition's teaching regarding the feminine, that real women are the referents of Tantric statements, and as such, must have held a prominent status within the tradition. Shaw assumes that women have maintained an equal status only on the basis that images and descriptions of women exist in the literature she consulted.

Reviewers of *Passionate Enlightenment* have identified similar problems in Shaw's methodology. Jacob Kinnard (1995), for example, writes that "like those scholars she criticizes, Shaw is engaged in interpretation and a certain degree of manipulation of her sources" (457). Similarly, Liz Wilson (1996) comments that in her attempt to displace traditional conclusions regarding Tantric women, Shaw only succeeds "in replacing her predecessors' monolithic image of Tantric women with an equally one-dimensional image" (61), "overplay[ing] her hand in claiming that she has succeeded where other scholars have failed" (64). Yet *Passionate Enlightenment* continues to receive praise from scholars across many disciplines and the *American Historical Association* awarded Shaw the "James Henry Breasted Prize" (for the best book written on a subject prior to 1000 BCE)[5] in 1996. Even those critics who accuse Shaw of a suspicious historiographical approach laud the book for breaking new ground. Kinnard notes that

Passionate Enlightenment is an "important addition to a growing collection of studies focused on women in Buddhism (457); Wilson concludes that it "calls for a serious rethinking of the scholarly discourse on the role of women and the feminine," (64); and Dermot Killingly (1997) comments on how its sense of urgency "gives a refreshingly new view of the material" (118). I propose, instead, that Shaw's conclusions, informed only by the images of Tantra's religious imagination, should *not* become the point of departure for further studies on the status of Tantric women. Shaw's proposals do not lead to a better understanding of women's history because she fails to explore the tension between images of "woman" and the social and historical context out of which these images were born. Feminist scholarship in religion must scrutinize both its motivations and methods of analysis. One way to begin an exploration into the relationship between idealized images of the feminine and the marginalization of real female practitioners is through contemporary historical analyses of gender.

The Role of Feminist Theory

Shaw's conclusions regarding the status of Tantric women lack any serious consideration of feminist theoretical discussions on gender. Thus I propose that feminist scholars of Tantra incorporate such discussions into their readings of Tantric literature and imagery in order to offer more informed perspectives on the lives of female practitioners in history. When this theoretical model is employed in an examination of a Buddhist tradition in particular, we must ask whether one can discuss categories of gender within a tradition where the nature of sexual identity has, at least ideologically, been deconstructed. A study of women, or the feminine principle, becomes complex within the confines of Tantra, where the notion of the impermanence of gender and the

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[5] Listed in *Historian*, Summer 1996, Volume 58, Issue 4.

body prevails[6]. Yet if we dismiss the possibility of exposing Tantric ideals of the feminine in terms of gender because the ideology of the tradition rejects such a category, we risk overlooking the realities of women in relationship to these ideals. We would then be forced to reach a conclusion similar to that of Shaw, and we would continue to overlook the tension between the "woman" of the religious imagination and real Tantric women.

Western feminist theory gives us the tools to consider how categories of "woman" and "feminine" have been informed by religious and cultural discourse – what feminists have noted as the on-going construction of gendered categories. This theoretical perspective has challenged methodological models across disciplines to consider how the construction of the "feminine" has determined the way in which 'women' are represented in literature and religious texts. Most importantly it has alerted scholars to the challenges inherent in making statements regarding women in history based on these gendered images. In my critique of *Passionate Enlightenment* I will draw on the work of Joan Scott and Marsha Hewitt to direct this critique toward Tantric literature and show how Shaw's textual analysis lacks a coherent theoretical understanding of the relationship between gendered discourse and the images on which she relies to make statements about Tantric women. Scott's discussion of the construction of historical "woman," particularly in her essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986), pushes gender beyond its descriptive function (where gender serves only as a synonym for "women"), to ask instead, "how does gender give meaning in the organization and perception of historical knowledge" (1055)? Thus Scott defines gender as the culmination of multiple cultural constructions that are both created and maintained by social institutions (including

[6] For example, see Śariputra's debate with the unnamed goddess in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* in Young, 319.

religious traditions). Marsha Hewitt's essay, "Ideology Critique: Feminism, and the Study of Religion" (1999), identifies the way in which many feminist scholars of religion offer conclusions regarding the status of women in religious traditions based on what those scholars identify as the "true" meaning of the tradition, that is, the tradition as it *should* or *would* exist if it had not been tainted by androcentric culture. By analogy to Marxist ideology critique, Hewitt argues convincingly that religious traditions, including their literature, cannot be studied apart from the cultural context out of which they are born. That is, the ideals of a tradition do not necessarily translate into what a tradition's practice would look like had it not been influenced by (male) culture.

With this historical analysis in mind, I challenge Shaw's reading of Tantric literature on the grounds that cultural discourses are implicated in the representation of women and the feminine more than she acknowledges. Thus, for example, her reading of Tantric texts that instruct male practitioners to approach all women as though they are embodiments of buddhas, and her subsequent conclusion that real Tantric women must have enjoyed respect and honour on account of this instruction unravel, especially when Shaw's supporting evidence comes only from other textual sources. While literature is often the only source for historiographical research, such analyses must acknowledge the interplay of ideology and cultural discourse that emerges out of the context of male dominance. If Shaw truly believes that Tantra challenged and surpassed the historical secondary status of women she must first employ gender as an analytic tool in order to make statements regarding historical female practitioners based on Tantric images of the feminine. When Shaw disregards the role of cultural discourse in the formation of these images her conclusions become speculations at best. As an alternative I will move

forward with an historical analysis that seeks to uncover how gender has served to establish categories of "woman" within Tantric Buddhism. In so doing I will first give a brief description of "gender" as it has been understood differently by feminist theorists, and then move forward into a deeper reading of Scott and Hewitt's models of analysis. This serves as a preparation for my subsequent critique of *Passionate Enlightenment* in later chapters.

Gayle Rubin (1975) examines "gender" as a way to distinguish between that part of a person's identity which is formed by her/his biology (sex) and that which is a product of cultural discourse (gender). Rubin maintains that "every society has a sex/gender system – a set of arrangements by which the biological raw material of human sex and procreation is shaped by human social intervention and satisfied in a conventional manner, no matter how bizarre some of the conventions may be" (164). These components are conceptually separable. In other words, a woman "only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human dictaphone in certain relations" (158). Rubin distinguishes between the sex/gender system and patriarchy, defining sex and gender in her lexicon as *neutral* terms "which refer to [a] domain and indicates that oppression is not inevitable in that domain, but is the product of the specific social relations which organize it" (168). One such social relation is the kinship system which organizes the oppression and marginalization of women (175). Relying on the work of Lévi-Strauss, Rubin argues that the origins of culture lie in a system of gift transactions. Women are given as gifts to other men in the society to ensure a kinship of brothers, cousins, and extended families. Within this system, women are the gifts and men are the givers and receivers of gifts. Rubin concludes that "as long as the

relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges – social organization" (175). To enter into a gift exchange as a partner, "one must have something to give. If women are for men to dispose of, they are in no position to give themselves away" (175). The division of social life between men and women is not determined by biological foundations, but is instead the result of culturally determined structures only contingently related to sexual difference.

The most striking criticism of the sex/gender system in subsequent feminist commentary is that it relegates sex or the body to the realm of the ahistorical and the static. Where is the body in the contemporary search for gender? Is feminist theory now so focused on the role of culture and discourse that the sexed body is politically speaking, irrelevant? Tina Chanter (1998) writes that "just as it no longer seems viable to many feminists to separate out thinking from bodies and passions, so it no longer seems credible for feminists to focus exclusively on the category of gender at the expense of sex" (265). The problem, then, is that the sex/gender dichotomy has come to privilege gender over sex in the same way that hierarchical structure is active in other dichotomies, and the question becomes whether or not gender is a useful category when set in contrast against the sexed body. Judith Butler (1999) argues that the distinction is not necessary to reject biological determinism in the first place – as Rubin previously suggested – in fact, the distinction leads feminist theory in the wrong direction because it fails to recognize that sex is as discursively constructed as gender. In other words, making such a distinction between the natural and cultural creates a false stability of sex and nature. Gender, then, as presented in this dichotomy, can only exist in relation to sex (30).

This is an important criticism of the sex/gender distinction that points to the restrictive nature of such rigid categorization. Raia Prokhovnik (1999) suggests that this "hard-shelled holism" (36) – the idea that two opposed positions sum up the range of possibilities – is a common weakness within dichotomous structures. Dichotomous thinking, she argues, "closes off other potential resources … by forcing any possibility into an established polar opposition, in which any particular choice involves the rejection, exclusion, disapproval or rebuff of another, now an Other" (36). Even when gender is understood to represent multiple influences and constructions, it becomes fixed within its own category when presented only as a dichotomy in relation to sex. Here, gender is only the cultural because it is not the natural (the natural being the only other available option). In contrast, Toril Moi accuses Butler and other feminist theorists of trying too hard to dismiss the dichotomy while maintaining the terminology that situates sex and gender into the dichotomy in the first place. In *What is a Woman?* (1999), she finds not the poststructuralist goal, to develop a non-essentialist and historical view of sex, problematic, but rather, she rejects the level of abstraction that such a project appears to entail. It fails, she says, by "not delivering the concrete, situated, and materialist understanding of the body it leads us to expect" (31). Instead, Moi argues that the sex/gender distinction cannot be easily understood through the traditional binary opposition that the poststructuralists are trying to deconstruct. All that is required to reject biological determinism, Moi suggests, is to explicitly deny that sexual differences should dictate social norms – and in so doing, there is no need to separate sex and gender into two distinct categories.

I have introduced this discussion of the sex/gender distinction for two reasons. First, it allows the reader to recognize where Shaw's analysis lacks theoretical sophistication with regards to her frequent use of terms such as "femaleness" (49), "gender ideology" (68), and "gender dualism" (40) without any clarification to explain what she means by these terms. The reader is left to speculate as to whether Shaw is referring to what she believes are innate, or "natural," characteristics of female Tantrics or if she is in fact referring to constructed ideals. For instance, when Shaw refers to the "women" and "men" of Tantric theory, is she commenting on the polarity between females and males, in that Tantra makes distinctions between sexed bodies? On the one hand, she often refers to a "divine femaleness" mentioned in *tantras* and narratives that empowers women to feel confident about their own spiritual abilities (41) – is this the biological "sex" of the sex/gender distinction? On the other hand, do her comments on Tantra's "gender dualisms," specifically with regards to her claims that women enjoyed an exalted status on account of these dualisms (69), refer to the tradition's discourses regarding the feminine or masculine character? If Shaw deliberately disregards the distinctions, her motives for doing so are ambiguous. Yet without a clear theoretical structure that recognizes the complex relationship between gendered ideals and female practitioners, her contention that textual descriptions of "women" can point us to the historical participation of real women falls short.

Second, I have chosen to move forward with an analysis of gender as it is commonly understood in opposition to "sex," despite the noted criticisms of scholars like Chanter and Butler. As Moi argues, one need not necessarily maintain a distinction between the two terms – one must simply acknowledge that sexual differences should not

dictate social norms (37). I propose that the term "gender" advances a closer examination of cultural discourses in a way that has often been ignored in Tantric scholarship – though it is not intended to deny the effects of discourse on what is alternatively labelled as "sex." Thus I move forward with Scott and Hewitt's discussion of gender and discourse as it pertains to my reading of *Passionate Enlightenment*.

Joan Scott suggests that "the term gender is part of the attempt by contemporary feminists to stake claim to a certain definitional ground, to insist on the inadequacy of existing bodies of theory for explaining persistent inequalities between women and men" (1986, 1066). She contributes to the expanding feminist pursuit of transforming disciplinary paradigms with a "critical reexamination of the premises and standards of existing scholarly work" (1986, 1054). Yet she observes that modern scholarship has pushed "gender" to the margins of critical study: her proposal, then, is to push gender beyond its descriptive function to ask, "how does gender give meaning in the organization and perception of historical knowledge? The answers depend on gender as an analytic category" (1986, 1055). I propose that Scott's specific directive to use gender *critically* allows Shaw's reader to look beyond her description of feminine ideals to question how this *knowledge* regarding women came to be and how these ideals are maintained. Scott's understanding of gender points towards a methodology that can answer some of my earlier questions about the study of the formation of religious ideals regarding women and men.

Gender, argues Scott, has often been used as a synonym for "women," yet: "in this usage, 'gender' does not carry with it a necessary statement about inequality…" (1986, 1056). Either gender studies becomes a descriptive task for historians to point to

the existence and participation of women, or gender analysis is limited to areas commonly associated with women. As such, gender "does not have the analytic power to address (and change) existing historical paradigms" beyond the traditional scope of 'women' (1986, 1057). More important for Scott is the interrelationship between gender and its socio-historical context. In other words, we need to "scrutinize our methods of analysis, clarify our operative assumptions, and explain how we think change occurs" (1986,1067). Here Scott introduces her definition of gender in two parts. To begin, Scott suggests that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" (1986, 1057). Scott breaks this down into four separate, yet interrelated areas. First, cultural symbols (such as Eve and Mary) evoke multiple, often contradictory meanings. Second, there are the "normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities" (1986, 1057). These normative concepts are often presented in the form of binary oppositions and can assert a set of meanings about femininity and masculinity. Scott argues that one set of meanings is positioned against the other, with the 'winner' presented as the 'natural' option. Third, in order to fully comprehend the role of normative concepts, the analysis must also look to social institutions. Scott criticizes scholars who look only to the kinship system's role in the construction of gender (such as in Gayle Rubin): we must look beyond familial relations to outside institutions and structures in order to fully understand the foundation of social organization (1986, 1068). For example, how do institutions such as education or political governments inform our understanding of gender? Finally, Scott acknowledges the role of psychoanalysis in the reproduction of gender. Historians need "to examine the ways in which gendered

identities are substantively constructed and relate their findings to a range of activities, social organizations and historically specific cultural representations" (1069).

The interplay between the concepts of gender and social experience is reflected in the second half of Scott's definition. She suggests that "gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power. Changes in the organizations of social relationships always correspond to changes in representations of power, but the direction of change is not necessarily one way" (1986, 1067). Influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Scott argues that gender is implicated in the conception and/or construction of power itself: "established as an objective set of references," objective in that ideas of gender appear fixed and concrete, "concepts of gender structure perceptions [and the] symbolic organization of all social life" (1986, 1067). Scott points to the process by which power is legitimated through, not simply a reflection of, gender, and she illustrates the interrelationship between the two through an analysis of political power in the fourth section of her essay. Gender, Scott argues, "is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (1986, 1069).

Scott extends gender to the study of political power for two reasons: gender has often appeared antithetical to politics (such as the way gender is often used only to describe the "traditional" lives of women, especially in the family), and consequently, the study of political history has always been resistant to questions of women and gender (1986, 1069). "Gender," Scott argues, "has been employed literally or analogically in political theory to justify or criticize the reign of monarchs and to express the relationship between the ruler and ruled" (1986, 1070). The institution of political power has been (and still is) legitimated by analogies to gender relationships. As a result, power has

become masculine, and those over whom the powerful have control, have become feminine. For example, Scott refers to discussion over divorce legislation in France. Louis de Bonald wrote that just as democracy allowed the weak to rebel against authority, so divorce allowed the weak (women) to rebel against marital authority (men): "In order to keep the state out of the hands of the people, it is necessary to keep the family out of the hands of the wives and children" (Bonald cited in Scott, 1986, 1071). In other words, just as the state does not want democracy to extend power to the people, it does not want divorce to extend power to women. Consequently, "changes in gender relationships can be set off by views of the needs of the state" (1986, 1071). Scott further describes how rulers have legitimated their authority as 'masculine' (strong and rational) while coding enemies and those who are dominated as "feminine" (weak, in need of guidance and protection), all the while implementing legislation that controlled or helped powerful (men) to maintain power over women. She concludes that:

> These actions and their timing make little sense in themselves; in most instances, the state had nothing immediate or material to gain from the control of women. The actions can only be made sense of as part of an analysis of the construction and consolidation of power. (1986, 1072)

Even when power seems to have nothing to do with gender, the concepts are nevertheless coded in gendered terms and this establishes their meaning.

Scott's formulation of gender as a category of historical analysis

> calls into question the reliability of terms that have been taken as self-evident by historicizing them. The story is no longer about the things that have happened to women and men and how they have reacted to them;

> instead it is about how the subjective and collective meanings of women and men as categories of identity have been constructed. If identities change over time and are relative to different contexts, then we cannot use simple models of socialization that see gender as the more or less stable product of early childhood education in the family and school. (1999, 6)

She establishes that "woman" is a constructed category and she argues that recognizing these constructions is essential to any project where women's lives are the subjects of inquiry. This involves locating the structures, both material and intellectual, within which such constructions of gender are formed. A necessary element of Scott's proposal is that the historical "woman" to whom we have access is only accessible when it is approached from the various perspectives of cultural discourses. Marsha Hewitt's essay, "Ideology Critique, Feminism, and the Study of Religion" (1999), calls attention to the way in which some feminist scholars in religion have minimized this critical perspective, not by denying cultural influences on a religious tradition, but by suggesting that there is a "true" form of the tradition that exists prior to the external influences. In so doing, scholars can make claims regarding the status of women based on ideals. To position religion somewhere apart from culture, however, curbs any serious attempt to address the tension between idealized images of the feminine and the lived experience of real women.

According to Hewitt, ideology critique is "part of a materialist critique of reason which analyzes the concrete, primarily economic mediations of culture, along with those *concepts, values, ideas, and norms* which accrue within those mediations and structure human life-worlds" (47, my emphasis). These mediations serve sectional interests. "What

Marx provides," Hewitt argues, "is insight into those opaque aspects of religion which function to reproduce and sustain certain material practices of society which instantiate and maintain power as dominations and hierarchical structure" (48). Ideology critique in the study of religion explores how religions "interact and intersect with non-religious dimensions within their culture and society to produce and sustain various forms of domination" (49). Religion, then, functions to serve a "hegemonic influence of sectional interests, and the means used to conceal this entire process" (49).

Feminism, according to Hewitt, has often functioned as an ideology critique. Yet there are risks involved when enlisting an ideology critique within feminist studies in religion because there can often be a "manipulation of the critique in order to generate the construction of new ideologies that then serve the ideologist's own interests" (47). Some attempts at ideology critique

> establish new ideological forms that at times can accomplish little more than simple (which at times can look sophisticated) reversalism of that which they criticize. There are feminist critiques of religion that fall into this category and are themselves in need of deeper feminist critique: a feminist critique that is at the same time ideology critique with the capacity to expose the ideological tendencies in false emancipatory theories. (51)

Such attempts at ideology critique, such as feminist reconstructions of religions, cannot be considered feminist critical theories of religion. Hewitt defines feminist critical theory of religion as an inquiry into "the ways in which religious traditions harbour mechanisms of power that result in the subordination and oppression of women" (51). A feminist

critical theory of religion should not employ "a new theological interest," but instead identify how religious traditions sustain ideologies and practices of domination (51).

Hewitt offers Rita Gross' *Buddhism after Patriarchy* (1993) as an example of how ideology critique is manipulated under the guise of feminist critical theory. In this case it is Gross' presupposition that Buddhism occupies "some ontological position beyond culture" that allows her to present Buddhism as a feminist tradition (Hewitt 52). First, Gross asserts that Buddhism "is non-reducible to its cultural matrix," since religion contains a "non-reducible essence" (316), and second, that "Buddhism must be feminist in order to be true to its vision" (56). Yet, Hewitt argues, if Buddhism is both feminist at its core and acultural in its origins, does that also mean that feminism is also untouched by culture? Similar attempts have been made in Christian theology – that is, many feminist theologians propose that Christianity possessed "non-sexist central teaching and vision" that was later altered by androcentric cultural norms (55). Hewitt argues that neither analysis reflects a critical feminist theory. References in religion that honour women "do not make Jesus or Christianity feminist," or "logically give evidence to [Buddhism's] social practices" (55). If a tradition, Buddhist or other,

> is to be reconstructed along feminist lines and in accordance with feminist goals, it can only do so under pressure from external ideological forces. It is illegitimate for scholars in religion to import an external, foreign, modern ideology into an ancient religious tradition in order to proclaim this ideology as the underlying centre of authenticity of that religion. (55)

In response to Gross and other feminist scholars of religion, Hewitt maintains that a feminist critical theory must seek to expose the mechanisms of ideologies which support

the secondary status of women. The manipulation of an ideology critique by feminists only pushes studies further into the "religious imagination" and creates even more distance between ideals and social practice. Thus Hewitt's essay points to a feminist analysis of religion that is not a feminist *critical theory* of religion because it lacks any real consideration of the role discourses play in a tradition's representation of women.

I propose that if we move forward with Scott's description of gender as a category of analysis and Hewitt's critical reflection on feminist scholarship in religious studies, we can begin a critical reading of Shaw that would allow us to examine Tantric images of women and the feminine in light of how they are both formed within and contribute to a culture's larger picture of gender. Through Scott's multi-layered definition, for example, we see that Shaw's conclusions regarding the status of Tantric women come from a primarily *descriptive* understanding of gender. When Shaw refers to the role of "gender" in Tantra she is accepting the tradition's discourse not only as an accurate description of women's participation, but also as a desirable "gender ideology" with a "gynocentric balance" (68). Only once does Shaw identify a time in which the tradition's ideology is not in balance with the lives of real women. Here she refers to the living tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, where "there are those whose monastic orientation requires them to abstain from the kinds of intimacy described in the tantras and sometimes causes them to develop compensatory fear and hatred of women" (53). Yet Shaw's conclusions are firm as to the traditions of historical Tantra. I wonder, though, if scholars were to look back on the Tibetan tradition of 2003 five hundred years from today, would they not see the same highly idealized images of *dakinīs* and female buddhas, read the same Tantric texts which describe in detail how women and the feminine principle ought to be worshipped, and

then make similar conclusions to those of Shaw regarding the status of women in the tradition in 2003? This conclusion would not correspond with the current status of Buddhist women. Perhaps, then, these images alone are insufficient to justify such conclusions.

Chapter Two: Miranda Shaw's *Passionate Enlightenment*

In the previous chapter I explained my initial concerns with Miranda Shaw's project in *Passionate Enlightenment*. I suggested that using gender *critically* as a category of analysis could expand feminist scholarship in Tantric Buddhism to consider the role of ideals and culturally constructed categories of "woman." In this chapter I take a closer look at Shaw's reading of Tantric literature, that is, her *evidence* that women were in fact full and equal participants in the tradition and the point of departure from which she begins her analysis of Tantra's "gender ideology" (68). I explore three of Shaw's examples – the instructions to worship and honour women found in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*; the Tantric teaching that requires male practitioners to recognize the divinity in all women; and the presence of women in the *siddha* narratives. In an alternative reading of Shaw's chosen literature, I argue that these sources point primarily to the idealized images of the feminine as they relate to male practice. These examples are insufficient to refute the traditional accounts regarding the low status of women in Tantra. In the end, her reading of Tantric literature does not point to the construction of gendered ideals that a critical analysis of these same texts could provide.

To Honour and Worship Women in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*

Shaw relies extensively on passages from the *Candamahārosana-tantra*, an *anuttara-yoga* text that outlines the practices of sexual yoga, in her chapter on women in Tantric theory. What sets this text apart from other sacred literature, Shaw argues, is its explicit instructions for the male practitioner to worship all women. In her view, Tantra's enforcement of gender dualisms helped to elevate the status of women to the level of the divine, and thereby contrasting it against the "gender neutrality" of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

Accordingly, women enjoyed an exalted status and the *Candamahārosana-tantra* serves as evidence for Shaw's claims. I suggest that Shaw misreads the text in that her analysis consists of select passages in isolation from the text as a whole. In this section I will offer a new reading of Shaw's example from Chapter Eight, "His Own Form," in such a way as to incorporate the passages leading up to Shaw's selection. I will demonstrate how the instruction to honour women is in fact only described as it is pertinent to male practitioners and does not necessarily reflect on the status of female practitioners.

Tantric texts, Shaw suggests, are set apart from other Buddhist traditions by their explicit prescriptions to worship women: "the most salient feature of Tantric literature in regard to women is an uncompromising attitude of respect and homage" (39). Shaw refers to a passage from the *Candamahārosana-tantra* to support her claim:

> *samsevayet striyam/*
> *striyah svargah striyo dharmah striya eva param tapah/*
> *striyo buddhah striyah samghah prajnāpāramitā striyah.*
> (Shaw, 241-215, 11n)

> One should honor women.
> Women are heaven, women are truth,
> Women are the supreme fire of transformation.
> Women are Buddha, women are religious
> community, women are the perfection of wisdom. (Shaw, 39)

This passage, Shaw contends, aligns women with core Buddhist teachings in a unique way: women are not instructed to pay homage to the Three Jewels because they *are* the

Three Jewels themselves. As such, the male practitioner is to pay homage to women in the same way one is to pay homage to the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, making this instruction a radical departure from earlier Theravada and Mahāyāna teachings. However, Shaw presents these five lines in isolation from their position within the entire passage, and so, her interpretation lacks not only a discussion of historical context, but of textual context as well. When these lines are read as part of the greater passage, the call to respect women may not be as empowering as Shaw would have the reader believe. A closer reading of the preceding passages reveals that the instruction to worship women comes from within a discussion of how male tantric practice is supported and advanced by women: women are to be worshipped in such a way that benefits the male practitioner, or *yogi*.

Shaw's chosen passage comes from the eighth chapter of the *Candamahārosana-tantra*, "His Own Form" (Skt. *svarupa*). This chapter records a conversation between Candamahārosa and the Lady Prajnāpāramitā. The first to speak, Candamahārosa asks the Lady,

> How, my dear, must your form be known
> by the yogi? How will the Lady be
> honored by the yogi (George, 81)

While it is the Lady's form that is to be known, it appears to be so only for the purpose of the yogi's knowing, where the yogi (*yoginā*, Skt. instrumental case) represents the logical subject of the text and the Lady (*bhagavatī*, Skt. nominative case) is the object to be known by that subject. The full Sanskrit line is as follows: *tvadīyam yoginā rūpam jnātavyam tu katham priye/ bhagavatī cārādhitā kena yoginā vā bhavisyati* (32). Because

this question is posed in the passive voice, the instrumental identifies the logical subject of the sentence while the nominative, traditionally the subject case, renders the logical object. The relationship between the knower and the known is thus dictated by the text itself and the worship of women to which Shaw refers must be interpreted within this dualism of subject/object positions.

When Shaw translates the Sanskrit text, "*samsevayet striyam/ striyah svargah striyo dharmah striya eva param tapah/ striyo buddhah striyah samghah prajnāpāramitā striyah*" (George, 33), as an instruction to male practitioners to worship all women, she begins her translation at the end of a sentence, omitting the initial words "*dadanti ksanamātrena tasmāt*". Christopher George, in the only published English translation of the *Candamahārosana-tantra* (Chapters I-VIII), translates *tasmāt* as "therefore," and includes this particle at the beginning of his English sentence: "Therefore one should honor women" (82). If we look further back to the lines directly preceding this passage, we find the following in George's translation:

> Each in her form is resolute in
> benefiting all living beings. Whomever
> among them are encountered, they are
> honored by the yogis, kissing, embracing,
> and joining the Vajra and Lotus.
> When those women are honored, they
> give Success instantly to those who
> desire the welfare of all beings.
> Therefore one should honor women. (82)

Here we have an instruction for the male Tantric practitioner to honour women by "joining the Vajra and Lotus," that is, to engage in sexual intercourse (with Vajra representing the penis and Lotus the vagina).[7] Consequently, if the male practitioner follows these instructions to unite with a woman, the woman will grant him "Success," or *siddhi* (33). Thus, the *yogi*, the subject of these instructions, can advance along the Tantric path if he worships the *yoginī* through sexual union. Becoming a *siddha*, one who has attained a high level of magical or supernatural powers (Goldman 491), and who has attained enlightenment in this lifetime (Robinson, 2), is one of the primary goals of the Tantric practitioner, making a woman's "gift" of *siddhi* very appealing. That this gift is *from* a woman and *for* a man is explicit in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*. It is for this reason, for the spiritual "benefits" available to the male practitioner, that "one should honor women." Shaw ignores the functionalist implications of "therefore" and the lines preceding her selected passage and instead assumes that the textual call to worship women provided a religious milieu within which women flourished on the Tantric path.

Purity of Vision

Shaw argues that women must have enjoyed an exalted status in the tradition because numerous sacred texts and biographies describe how male practitioners were able to advance on the religious path only once they recognized that all women were divine. Thus, women in this world were understood to be emanations of deities such as Tārā or Vajrayoginī. According to Shaw, these stories of "pure vision" support the instruction to worship women as found in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*. In this section I describe

[7] Chapters four, six, and seven of the *Candamahārosana-tantra* outline the sexual union between a man and a woman, where vajra and lotus represent the male and female sexual organs. See George's translation of Chapter Six, "The Yoga of Completion" (1974, 65-78), for a detailed explanation of sexual yoga.

Shaw's proposal by way of some of the examples she offers in *Passionate Enlightenment*, suggest some initial concerns regarding her conclusions, and offer an alternate reading and interpretation of one example in particular.

Shaw argues that male tantrics were distinguished from non-practitioners by their ability to see all women as divine. Tantric texts call this "pure vision," the sight that allows men to recognize seemingly ordinary women as buddhas and bodhisattvas. According to Shaw, the many narratives which tell the story of male practitioners "discovering" their female partners and gurus supports her thesis that women held a high status in Tantric history. Urgyanpa, for example, attained pure vision when a courtesan's daughter served him a bowl of curry.[8] "In a scene that to ordinary vision might appear to be a low-caste woman serving food to a man," Shaw argues, "was in actuality the glorious Vajrayoginī dispensing a blessing, and a person of pure vision would be able to perceive the reality of the situation" (43). She connects "the discovery of woman-as-divine" with women's high status in Tantric circles and subsequently argues that Tantra raised women from their low position within the Indian caste system to the exalted status of teacher and deity. Yet her discussion of pure vision lacks consistency. It is unclear whether pure vision refers here to the ability to see that women and men have equal insights and reached equal stages of development (that there is no difference between men and women), or, if pure vision allows male practitioners to recognize that women have, because they are women, attained higher spiritual insights. The distinction is unclear, particularly with regard to the latter interpretation, since Shaw's examples offer little insight into the practice of ordinary female practitioners. In contrast to the extensive descriptions of male practice, the women in her examples appear to require virtually no

spiritual training. The source of their advancement on the Tantric path often remains completely hidden. Her next example, what she calls a 'test case for purity of vision" (43), leaves many questions unanswered.

Shaw retells the story of Buddhaguhya and Buddhasanti from Lama Chimpa's translation of *Tāranātha's History of Buddhism in India* (1970): Two yogis on a pilgrimage came into contact with two women tending animals on the hillside. Because neither had attained purity of vision, they did not recognize that one was Tārā giving Buddhist teaching and the other was Bhrkutī preaching the dharma. One pilgrim, Buddhasanti, suspected that it may be part of his spiritual journey to recognize these women as something other than they appeared, and for this he was rewarded by Tārā. Buddhaguhya, having ignored this opportunity to recognize Tārā and Bhrkutī, missed the chance for advancement. Like the women of the *Candamahārosana-tantra* who give male practitioners spiritual success, Shaw suggests that the actions of the two pilgrims supports the idea that women are able to grant success because they are women – all that is required, according to sacred literature, is that men honour women through recognition and worship. She argues that Buddhasanti's actions illustrate the "Tantric Buddhist valuation of the female gender," or what she calls the "doctrine of divinity of all women"(43-44).

Shaw makes two assumptions in order to offer the text's messages in support of her claim that women were full participants in Tantra. Her first assumption rests on the Tantric teaching that "an illuminated person can manifest the presence and appearance of deity. Full identification with deity is one of the goals of Tantric practice, whereas the ability to perceive deity is one the fruits of spiritual progress" (43). This seems to be in

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[8] Taken from George Roerich's *Blue Annals*, 1976, 701.

accordance with general Tantric sādhana, or practices. Mircea Eliade (1969) notes that the iconography of the Tantric deities plays an active role in the tradition in that it supports practice such as meditation. Tantric iconographic images such as Tārā "represent a 'religious' universe that must be entered and assimilated" (207). The ability of women to "enter" and "assimilate" the forms of Tārā and Bhrkutī, then, aligns women with this core Tantric teaching. But did this teaching transcend into the tradition in such a way that men saw real women as divine? Shaw introduces these stories as examples of the teaching, but she ends her discussion of pure vision here. More evidence is required to suggest, as Shaw does, that this teaching impacted the lives of ordinary women. Thus, Shaw's second assumption is more problematic. Her interpretation suggests that Tārā and Bhrkutī appeared on the hill as a result of enlightened female practitioners (the original women tending animals) manifesting the "presence and appearance" of deity. Yet if we look to Lama Chimpa's original translation of the story there is no emphasis at all on the practice or insights of any female practitioner – there is only description of how and for what reasons male practitioners view women. Shaw admits to having amended the original translation "slightly" (216, 25n), and for this reason it is necessary to return to the original.

The "doctrine of the divinity of all women" does not play an important role in Lama Chimpa's translation, yet Shaw argues that this story is a key example of this teaching. The story describes how Buddhasanti prays to Tārā because he is expecting every person or thing he meets on his pilgrimage to be, in some way, a corporeal manifestation of the omnipresent Buddha-mind: "Buddhasanti thought, 'Why should this place be full of such trivial objects? So all these are due to the defects of my vision. They

must be Tārā and others?' With this deep conviction, he earnestly prayed to them" (Chimpa, 281). Shaw's interpretation and subsequent retelling of the story implies that Buddhasanti recognized that women are embodiments of deity prior to Tārā and Bhrkutī having revealed their true identity, that is, he anticipated the divinity of the two women on account of Tantric teachings on the feminine. The original translation describes how Buddhasanti first reacted to the two women by calling them "trivial objects." The impression here is that even women, "trivial objects," are divine. The notion that all things should be recognized in their "true" form, or that no distinctions between "good" and "bad" should be made at all, plays an active role in many of the tradition's teachings. For example, the *Candamahārosana-tantra* describes how not just women, but their bodily excretions, must be worshipped and honoured: along with the consumption of fish, meat, and wine, "[the yogi] should drink [the women's] mouthwash and wash-water of the Lotus" (George, 78). Later in the same chapter, once Candamahārosa has listed the various bodily fluids of the woman, he exclaims:

> Just as when manure is applied, a
> tree becomes abundantly fruitful,
> so does a person have the true
> fruits of pleasure by eating unclean
> things.
> Neither old age, sickness, nor
> death comes to that person. And
> he who honors the unclean, and who is
> properly disciplined, will succeed.

(George, 79)

These passages explain that along with bodily fluids, even women should be welcomed by the yogi as a Tantric teaching. This teaching on pure vision, now slightly amended from Shaw's original definition, does not point to women's exalted status in the tradition, enforces the notion that, in this context, Tantric practice is a male practice. Just as the *Candamahārosana-tantra* informs the male yogi in the ways he can succeed through the worship of women, so is the yogi instructed to how to develop his pure vision.

The women of the *Eighty-Four Siddhas*

The presence of women in the stories of the great Tantric Siddhas, or masters, Shaw argues, illustrates the great extent to which women were active as teachers and participants on the Tantric path. Thus, while traditional scholarly accounts ignore and overlook the extensive participation of female tantrics, she has "discovered" women's roles by approaching texts like the Siddha narratives from a new perspective: "By assuming the subjectivity of women with regard to their own lives and their possession of intrinsic motivations for their actions, my approach to the sources has been different" (197). In this way, when others have concluded that the women of these sacred narratives served only as consorts or "handmaidens"(Snellgrove, 150) to the central male practitioner, Shaw has

> treated the references to women as information about their lives, rather than as place-markers in a blueprint for male domination. Instead of dismissing – or 'tokenizing' – each example of a women's activities or accomplishments as an anomaly or as evidence of women's subordination, I have accepted such examples as documents of women's history and have

> tried to weave or quilt those references together into a coherent pattern. On this basis I have been able to ascertain that women participated in every aspect of Tantric Buddhism. They were not relegated to the margins or to the lowermost rungs of religious progress but undertook the complete range of Tantric practices. (Shaw, 197, author's emphasis)

Again, I offer an alternative reading of the role of women in these narratives. While Shaw is correct to question the accuracy of traditional androcentric accounts of Tantric women, her alternative theoretical perspective is comprised only of new assumptions regarding women's roles. First, Shaw accepts these stories as historically accurate accounts of women's lives. She disregards any discussion of whether these references to *yoginīs* are in fact references to ideals and then uses these references to inform her claims regarding historical women's experiences. Similarly, she moves forward with her "new" theoretical perspective with such momentum (that is, working against traditional interpretive models) that she neglects the gendered divide that separates the practice of men and women in these stories. When forty-seven of the eighty-four stories lack any mention of a woman whatsoever, with only four autonomous female Siddhas, and the remaining thirty-three stories giving only brief mention to helpful dakinīs or a wife, sister, or consort of the primary male Siddha, this text is not sufficient evidence to offset traditional claims regarding women's marginal status.[9] The bulk of Shaw's conclusions on the Siddha narratives come not from new information, but from her alternative reading of the texts.

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[9] In my reading of the eighty-four *Siddha* stories as translated by James Robinson (1979) I found that forty-seven stories did not mention a woman, four stories are devoted to female *siddhas*, three make reference to a female consort or relationship between a male *siddha* and an unnamed woman, eleven mention *dakinīs*, five stories describe how women were obstacles to the religious practice of men, and three stories involve prostitutes. The remaining stories mention the presence of a wife, sister, or daughter, though none of these women are directly connected to the practitioners' path to success.

While she does refer to meditation manuals attributed to the siddha Laksminkarā, *rNal 'byor ma'i sgrub pa'i thabs* and *rDorje phag mo dbu bcad ma'i sgrub thabs*, the translations are not available for verification (Shaw, 111).[10] While feminist criticism has contributed to a new model of historical analysis by expanding the interpretive lens to include the often hidden lives of women, Shaw manipulates this model and isolates the Tantric tradition in such a way that the various constructions of gender are either ignored or idealized.

Let us look to an example of one of the eighty-four stories in which women play a significant role: the story of Ghantapa's path to liberation. This is a story of a king, Ghantapa, who abandoned his life of desire in order to follow the Tantric path as a monk. After many years of practice he settled near the palace of King Devapala. King Devapala, looking for spiritual assistance, asked Ghantapa to come stay with him in the palace, but Ghantapa refused again and again on the grounds that the kingdom was full of sin (such as pleasure, drinking alcohol, and possessions). In an act of revenge the king enlisted a courtesan to prove that Ghantapa's moral virtues were a sham. The courtesan sent her beautiful and virginal twelve-year-old daughter to be Ghantapa's servant. After Ghantapa's many objections, the (nameless) girl spent the night in his hut in order to avoid the walk home in the dark.

> The hut was very tiny. The sleepers were very restless. Inevitably, their bodies touched. Then their limbs intertwined. Before long, they had passed through the four levels of joy and traversed the path of liberation to its ultimate fulfillment. In six previous lives this very same girl had been the

[10] Shaw is the first to my knowledge to have translated these manuals and her translations have not yet been published. She does offer a few short passages in the original Tibetan in her notes.

> monk's downfall. Six times she had caused him to break his vow. But that was before his mind had become purified, before he had lost the yes and no, the subjective-objective duality of clouded eyes. But in this life, such defilements had long since dissolved into the infinite expanse of emptiness, and he had gained the true path. In the morning he asked the girl to remain with him and she agreed. They became yogin and consort. And because of her service to him for six lives, the defilements of Ghantapa's consort's mind were also purified. (Dowman, 148)

Later, in a confrontation with the angry king, Ghantapa revealed himself and his consort to be Samvara and Vajra Varahī, and the two hovered over the palace in sexual union. Through their actions, the whole kingdom attained liberation. After many years of service, the two ascended into the Dakinī paradise (Dowman, 145-150).

Shaw suggests that stories such as the tales of the Siddhas inspired female practitioners to recognize their own divine nature and to encourage their spiritual practice. According to Shaw, these stories serve both as historical evidence of women's participation and of their exalted roles as teachers and gurus. She argues that "women were indeed among the early teachers of the sexual yogas. Evidence that women had expertise in this area includes numerous instances of women providing secret oral instruction (*upadesa*) on the advanced inner yogas" (179). In Shaw's view the story of Ghantapa and his consort are an example of this practice (179). Furthermore, she suggests that women were not exploited in these relationships:

> Since women were teachers and experts on the sexual yogas, it is justifiable to suggest that women did not transmit teaching that they found

> unacceptable, offensive, or irrelevant to their religious aspirations. There were no external constraints upon them to do so … women were free to present the teachings in accordance with their own experiences and convictions. (Shaw, 193-194).

Yet in the story of Ghantapa, there were most definitely "external constraints." The daughter of the courtesan was instructed to go to Ghantapa by her mother in order that her mother would acquire wealth. There is nothing mentioned in either of the translations which suggests that the mother sent her daughter to Ghantapa as a spiritual teacher. Moreover, the young girl was twelve years old. What "experiences and convictions" is she supposed to have developed at this age? The story offers no information pertaining to any previous Tantric practice in her past, unless preparation for a young girl is comprised entirely of her possessing a perfect virginal body (as both translations describe) suitable for sexual union.

Next, this story does not indicate that the young girl set out to aid Ghantapa on his spiritual quest. The story details how she stayed that first night with him because of storms and unsafe conditions – if the young girl expressed her concerns for the purpose of manipulating Ghantapa in order to help him reach spiritual insight, the reader is not made aware of this detail. Shaw may argue for the latter interpretation since she chooses to read Tantric literature with the assumption that women were active participants who were well aware of their spiritual needs and progress. At present, such assumptions are unfounded. There is little in the story of Ghantapa that suggests the young girl acted on behalf of her own religious advancement. First, the courtesan (the mother of the young girl) is concerned only with the power and wealth she could attain if her daughter is successful in

swaying Ghantapa's moral pursuits. In Robinson's translation of the story, the young girl *is* more aware of her own sexuality, though her sexuality seems disconnected from any practice of Tantra: "'A beguiling girl,' she thought, 'if she desires eighty things, can gain a hundred.' And she thought further: 'If I am clever, I could seduce the four continents. What need I say for this monk? However pure his mind may be, I can beguile him'" (Robinson, 176). While it is a sexual relationship that leads Ghantapa on the liberatory path, the difference between the courtesan's and the young girl's "sex" and Ghantapa's "sex" is evident in the different levels of awareness associated with the act. The courtesan, for example, offers her daughter with hopes that she will manipulate Ghantapa to abandon his religious practice, not with hopes that her daughter will advance her religious training; Ghantapa's sexual relationship, however, is inextricably connected with an awareness of Tantric teaching:

> In six previous lives this very same girl had been the monk's downfall. Six times she had caused him to break his vow. But that was before his mind had become purified, before he had lost the yes and no, the subjective-objective duality of clouded eyes. But in this life, *such defilements* had long since dissolved into the infinite expanse of emptiness, and he had gained the true path. (emphasis added, 148)

Ghantapa's actions are further distanced from ordinary sexual practice when they are set against the "defilements" of his previous encounters with the young girl. Sexual activity does not lead to liberation without sufficient preparation in Tantric teaching, a teaching that in Ghantapa's case took several lifetimes to attain. Finally, what distinguishes the girl's participation in this story from other tools that assist Ghantapa's spiritual progress,

such as the monastic academy he attended or the guru he met on his travels (Dowman, 145)? That is, the young girl appears to serve this male practitioner's needs in her role as a sexual partner. Is it her wisdom that enlightens Ghantapa? Might Shaw argue that the young girl's wisdom comes in her willingness to abandon traditional paths in favour of sexual union? Has the girl learned from her previous lives that other paths, such as the *Vinaya* rules and monastic precepts against the misguiding pleasures of the body, are not the way to liberation? According to this story, this was not the case. The young girl is "*his* woman" (Robinson, 178, emphasis added). There is little in this story to support Shaw's claims that the girl's role in this Tantric relationship is representative of women's full and equal participation in the tradition.

Shaw does not challenge the narratives' depiction of women and one striking example of her uncritical response to the text is in her retelling of the story of "Dombipa," which she renames, "The Dancer and the King" (Shaw, 63). The king of Assam, who was already an advanced Tantric practitioner, met a twelve-year-old dancer with an aptitude for spiritual training, Dombiyoginī. Motivated by a vision that predicted he would soon meet his spiritual companion, he offered Dombiyoginī's family "an amount of gold equal to her weight," for her companionship. They practiced secretly for twelve years until they were forced to leave the kingdom when their relationship was discovered. In exile they both attained great spiritual insights (63). According to Shaw's analysis, the story of Dombiyoginī offered practitioners a glimpse into the enlightened practice of a great female Tantric master and she adds to this story a list of Dombiyoginī's magical powers (such as dancing on a lake) and meditation practices. She does so in order to reject the traditional scholarly interpretation that the king was

exploiting Dombiyoginī, since she did provide him "with an opportunity to overcome his caste prejudice" (64). While Shaw's attempt to identify the religious practice associated with Dombiyoginī is valuable, she takes many liberties in her reading of the story that result in suspect conclusions. First, she argues that the "king's payment to her family was a token of his sincerity and regard for the daughter and thus a sign of how well he would care for her. The king was not purchasing her but rather compensating her parents for the loss of her future earnings" (65). Shaw cannot claim, as a historical fact, that she has access to the intentions of the king. While Shaw tries to demonstrate how the interpretations of previous scholars were misguided, her counter-interpretation is based entirely on speculation. Next, in her attempt to offset the interpretation that Dombiyoginī was exploited in the relationship, Shaw argues that "it is hard to maintain that the dancer was 'exploited' by the king when they remained together for more than twenty years" (65). This is a weak argument, particularly in light of feminist scholarship regarding abusive and exploitative relationships between men and women. The defensive claim that "he could not have been abusive because she stayed with him for so many years" has been proven again and again to be inaccurate. Simply put, research in the area of domestic violence has sufficiently demonstrated that many women remain in abusive or exploitative relationships for many different reasons, and in turn, a long relationship between two people is not always indicative of a healthy relationship. The fact that Shaw advances such a claim is irresponsible.

Finally, Shaw ignores entirely the sexual tone in the text's description of the young Dombiyoginī. Looking to Dowman's and Robinson's translations of the story, where the king was an experienced practitioner already "initiated by the guru Virupa into

the meditation rites of the Buddha-deity Hevajra" when he met the young girl, Dombiyoginī was simply a beautiful virgin (Dowman, 41).

> All through the entertainment the king could not draw his eyes away from the face of one of the performers, a young girl of extraordinary purity and charm. Fair-skinned, with classical features and innocent demeanor, this virgin of twelve was as yet untainted by the world. She had all the qualities of a lotus child, a *padmini*, and the king decided then and there to make her his spiritual consort. (Dowman, 41)

In the same way, Robinson's translation also centres on the physical qualities of the young girl: "she had a lovely face and a good complexion; furthermore, she was unsullied by worldly thoughts and had all the qualities of a *padmini*" (Robinson, 34). Yet Shaw describes Dombiyoginī only as someone who possesses "an unworldly temperament and aptitude for spiritual training" (Shaw, 63)? Both Dowman and Robinson maintain the Sanskrit word *padmini* which, being formed from the same nominal root as *padma* or lotus, suggests a connection to female genitalia (maintaining the imagery active of the *Candamahārosana-tantra*). Dombiyoginī's title of *padmini*, then, suggests that her primary role is that of a sexual consort. In the same way that Ghantapa's consort serves as but one of many tools on *his* religious path, useful to him once he had experienced sufficient training in Tantric teaching, the young Dombiyoginī of this text functions to serve the needs of an already established and initiated male practitioner.

The role of gender in *Passionate Enlightenment*

Gender plays an active role in Shaw's analysis of Tantric Buddhism, yet the term "gender" is used interchangeably with terms such as "woman" and "femaleness"

throughout *Passionate Enlightenment*. The subject of her inquiry, then, is lost in the confusion of how Tantra's textual "woman" is connected to its female practitioners: Shaw relies on the textual "woman" to make claims regarding Tantra's gender ideology, which she then employs to make statements regarding historical practitioners. *Passionate Enlightenment* is a project situated within the larger scope of feminist studies in religion, yet Shaw's analysis lacks a meaningful recognition of the gender debate as outlined in the previous chapter. Accordingly, Shaw uses the term "gender" in isolation from its position within feminist theoretical discussions of culturally constructed *ideals*. Thus, I suggest that it is Shaw's vague representation of gender as a category of analysis that allows her to offer idealized images of women as direct reflections of Tantra's real female practitioners.

Shaw takes what Tantric literature offers regarding "the feminine" (theory) and the actions attributed to female tantrics (the application of that theory in practice) as the point of departure for her study into Tantra's gender ideology. She describes both Tantra's theory and practice in terms of how they function together to form a "gynocentric balance" in a tradition "distinctive among Buddhist subtraditions in its understanding of femaleness" (68). She continues to argue that

> in Tantric Buddhism a balance is achieved in practice by privileging the female in theory, to counteract an erosion or total loss of the balance by even the slightest male strategy of appropriation. Tipping the balance of esteem in favour of the women could serve as an expedient to prevent the female gender – and human women – from being submerged. (Shaw, 71)

There is little distinction in Shaw's account between the theory/practice as presented in Tantric literature (such as in the *tantras* and *Siddha* narratives) and actual Tantric practice in this world. That is, Shaw looks to sacred literature in order to find evidence of both theory *and* practice. While Shaw appeals to this distinction when she argues that "a balance is achieved in practice by privileging the female in theory," the sources from which she derives her information on practice are the same as her sources on theory, thus complicating the distinction. This becomes more puzzling because of Shaw's terminology. Throughout *Passionate Enlightenment*, she comments on "gender ideology" (68), "gender and embodiment" (195), and "assailable value of femaleness" (71), notions which are reflected, according to Shaw, in the tradition's theory and practice. The concept of gender as I introduced it in the first chapter, the constructed ideals regarding women that are born from cultural discourse, is lost in her interpretation of literary examples. Shaw's analysis falls victim to what Bruce Lincoln (1996) describes as the failure to distinguish between a tradition's "truths" and "truth-claims" (Lincoln, 227). In this way Shaw uses "gender analysis" to cover such a wide range of theories and practices that the tradition's "truths" regarding women are indistinguishable from the realities of practitioners. In fact, the reality of practitioners remains completely hidden because *only* the ideals are presented. Furthermore, although Shaw allies her project with Joan Scott's feminist analysis of gender (12), she fails one of Scott's primary formulations: in a study of history where gender is the central category of analysis, gender is not to be used as a synonym for women. When we confuse the two, we overlook the *processes* that inform gender as a category. Similarly, because Shaw uses "female gender" interchangeably with "women," her analysis lacks an awareness of

feminist discussions on sex and gender. In this way, Shaw does not clearly distinguish between physical human women (or biologically sexed females) and the roles prescribed for females (the roles that become feminine, or "gendered" roles). While constructed ideals inform the lives of female practitioners, Shaw overlooks the distinction entirely and thus she mislabels idealized images as evidence of historical practice.

Additionally, Shaw's conclusions regarding the exalted status of women (Tantra's "gender ideology") rest in part on a false presentation of Tantric theory. According to *Passionate Enlightenment* it is because women are aligned with wisdom, within the traditional dualism of wisdom and method, that male practitioners seek women's companionship as consorts. Shaw interprets feminine wisdom to represent an active and creative principle. She advances that real women, as the embodiment of wisdom and Buddha-nature, possessed a sort of "power" which is desired by the male practitioner in the form of Success on the religious path. Women in Tantric Buddhism, according to Shaw, occupy the top position of a common gender dualism in Indian philosophical and religious thought:

> Tantric Buddhism displays the conviction that all the powers of the universe flow through and from women. This affirmation of femaleness is a radical departure from the neutrality of Mahāyāna nondualism and clearly derives from the *Sākta* view of women as possessors of a special spiritual potency and as vessels and channels of the energy (*sākti*) that gives rise to life and well-being on all levels. (Shaw, 44)

Shaw's examples continuously point to a textual world where women are honoured, worshipped, and welcomed as consorts on account of this "spiritual potency" and, men,

who do the honouring and worshipping, reap the rewards of enlightenment. I am concerned with her suggestion that the Tantric gender dualism was rooted in Hindu Tantra and goddess worship, such as when she states that "women intrinsically possess and channel the power of transformation. The reason for this is not directly explained, perhaps because it is implicit in the Sākta metaphysics that Buddhist Tantrics share" (176). Yet as David Snellgrove (1987) describes Tantric Buddhism did not inherit the Hindu Tantric dualism. Instead, the dualism was reversed:

> We have here the Buddhist version of the Indian conception of manifest and unmanifest Brahman, as expressed in the Hindu tantras in the forms of Siva and Sākti, but as is now generally realized, the male and female roles are reversed. For the Buddhists wisdom, rather like Sancta Sophia in the Christian tradition, is regarded as feminine, and the active saving principle is male. (Snellgrove, 132)

The traditional Hindu Tantric dualism, where the feminine represents the active and creative principle and the masculine the passive, is reversed in Tantric Buddhism. Here, it is the *vajra* that represents the "means toward enlightenment and the means of conversion," while the bell or lotus represents Prajnāpāramitā, or emptiness (*sūnyatā*) (Snellgrove, 132). Thus Shaw's interpretation of the role of women in the *Siddha* narrative stories is skewed. For example, Shaw argues against the traditional interpretation that women were mere "handmaidens" for active male practice. She argues instead that women were themselves active in their own religious training by way of such examples as the stories of Ghantapa's consort and Dombiyoginī. Her analysis depends on an understanding that the stories' male practitioners sought female teaching and

companionship because women, drawing on the "gynocentric balance" of Tantric teaching, were highly developed practitioners. Yet when Buddhist Tantric theory reversed the traditional dualism so that the feminine came to be known as passive, women's alignment with wisdom became a passive role. Women *are already* wisdom, buddha-nature, and *dakinīs*, and their wisdom becomes necessary for male practice, or as Snellgrove suggests, the male means to enlightenment. From this perspective, any proposal that claims an active and dynamic role for women requires greater evidence than the gender dualism of Buddhist Tantra.

Shaw expects that the exalted status of the textual "woman" (whether this woman is a deity, a wife, consort, sister, prostitute, or other) necessarily correlated to a similar exalted status of real women. Yet as Ursula King aptly notes, the high status of women within the religious imagination does not always transpose into the lives of real practitioners. Thus observations on the women of the Tantric imagination alone are not a substitute for a critical evaluation of the status of women in the historical tradition. This type of textual analysis should inform a larger investigation into the "imagination" itself: feminist scholarship concerned with the status of female practitioners in Tantric Buddhism should instead seek to understand the roles that these idealized images of women served within the larger tradition. If the women of Tantric literature are *not* the real women of Tantra, then what exactly do these ideals represent?

Chapter Three: Toward a New Model of Analysis

My goal in this final chapter is to bring together the models of analysis represented by Marsha Hewitt's critical theory of religion and Joan Scott's understanding of gender as a useful category of analysis, in dialogue with the textual representation of women in Tantric literature. I will address Hewitt's discussion of the elements of a feminist critical theory of religion in light of contemporary criticisms of "experience" as a category of analysis. Whereas Shaw's analytical framework takes "experience" for granted, assuming that we can access the experiences of historical women through sacred literature, I suggest that an understanding of experience as a constructed category calls into question the reliability of these sources. In this way I expand on Hewitt's observation that a feminist critical theory of religion must avoid at all costs attempts to piece together an "authentic" tradition as it existed prior to the influence of androcentric culture. "To argue," writes Hewitt, "that religion occupies some ontological position beyond culture is incoherent" (1999, 52). It is by way of experience as a foundational category that scholars, such as Shaw, endeavour to rebuild traditions "as they should be," that is, outside the reach of multiple cultural discourses. These reconstructions are not, I suggest, equivalent to historical evidence. I will then examine Tantric practices and teachings against the background of Scott's understanding of gender as a constitutive element. For example, how does one's understanding of the image of a wandering Tantric yoginī change in light of Manu's instruction for men to "make their women dependent day and night [because] a woman is not fit for independence" (Doniger 197)? Shaw's reading of Tantric literature isolates teachings and instructions for practice from their origins in and interactions with cultural discourses. Thus I open the door for a new model of analysis

that can be used to examine Tantra in such a way that it recognizes the multiplicity of discourses from where these idealized images come.

The Limitations of Experience

At the core of Shaw's reading of Tantric literature, and subsequent conclusions regarding Tantra's gender ideology, is an assumption that these sources can serve as 'windows' through which we can access the authentic experiences of women in the historical Tantric communities. Whether our access to these experiences comes from texts attributed to women or those expressing the Tantric view of women or the feminine principle (views that could not have been articulated in isolation from female practitioners, according to Shaw), she challenges scholars to use these experiences – to "see" them – in order to speak with accuracy on the historical lives of female practitioners. Shaw, then, accepts experience as an unquestionable category of analysis. Just as she often accepts uncritically the idealized images of women in her reading of *tantras* and *siddha* narratives, Shaw moves forward with experience as a foundation of her analysis without considering the ways in which experience itself may be constructed. In "The Evidence of Experience" (1991), Joan Scott suggests that "it is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation – as a foundation on which analysis is based – that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference," in this case, a history of sexual difference (777). In this way, experience "becomes evidence for the fact of difference, rather than a way of exploring how difference is established, how it operates, how and in what ways it constitutes subjects who see and act in the world" (777). Thus,

> [m]aking visible the experience of a different group exposes the existence of repressive mechanisms, but not their *inner workings* or logic; we know that difference exists, but we don't know that it is relationally constituted. For that we need to attend to the *historical processes* that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience. (779, emphasis added)

In accordance with this theoretical model, one must ask how knowledge is produced and treat explanatory categories with suspicion. Experience, as one such explanatory category, has remained relatively unquestioned in its role to give the scholar access to a sort of historical "truth." The category of experience maintains a similar foundational status in the study of religion. However, in "Experience" (1998), Robert Sharf observes that it is "ill conceived to construe the object of the study of religion to be the inner experience of religious practitioners" (111). Furthermore, the scholar is not

> presented with experiences that stand in need of interpretation but rather with texts, narratives, performances, and so forth. While these representations may at times assume the rhetorical stance of phenomenological description, we are not obliged to accept them as such. On the contrary, we must remain alert to the ideological implications of such a stance. (111)

Just as history has relied on the authority of experience in its assignment of subject-positions, so too does religious studies depend on the authority or "truth" of experience: "The meaning of many religious symbols, scriptures, practices, and institutions,"

according to Sharf, "is believed to reside in the experience they elicit in the mind of practitioners" (94). But he suggests that scholars of religion ought not accept the authority of experience and instead "draw attention to the way in which the concept [of experience] functions in religious discourse" (113). Thus a feminist analysis of Tantra, which relies on the authority of women's experiences, as they are presented in sacred literature, must first recognize that these experiences, like gender, are constructed.

When relying on the authority of experience as it is documented in literature, issues of historical accuracy are unavoidable. In "Images of Gender in the Poetry of Krisna" (1986), John Stratton Hawley identifies the challenges inherent in the study of historical literature. In his comparative study of Hindu poets Mīrā and Sūr, Hawley acknowledges the uncertainty with which literary works can be attributed to historical figures. "It ought to be made clear at the outset that we know literally nothing with certainty about two historical beings named Mīrā and Sūr," Hawley notes; "when we speak here of Mīrā and Sūr, then, we merely accept the collective designation for the poems that have been attributed to each over the course of time" (243). He is able to proceed with an analysis of the ways in which the feminine principle is discussed in the work of these Hindu poets, to explore how ideals of gender are expressed through the description of romantic love for Krisna, while at the same time recognizing that "Mīrā" and "Sūr" may only exist in so far as their names have been attributed to collections of poetry. In *Passionate Enlightenment*, however, Shaw fiercely resists this assumption. Looking back to her reading of the *Śiddha* narratives, we see that Shaw accepts the narratives' description of Dombīyoginī and Ghantapa's consort without even a consideration that these stories may not in fact reflect the real "experiences" of these

Tantric women, nor does she consider the possibility that the experiences attributed to these women were also subject to construction by way of their involvement in the larger Tantric tradition. For instance, she offers a text attributed to Sahajayoginīcintā as evidence for the experience of women as teachers and for their participation in Tantric circles (182).[11] Shaw assumes without question that Sahajayoginīcintā is the authentic author of the text and describes the author's daily life and experiences by way of general historical accounts of the lives of women at that time, including the *Kāmasūtra*, and contemporary research into medieval India (261, 52n). She assumes that we have access to the thoughts and ideas of women through this *historical* figure, that this text is evidence of women's positive and fulfilling religious experience. In this way, the Tantric ideals that contribute to the exalted status of women are made true through the documented experience of this female practitioner. Thus, the evidence of experience is a necessary foundation for Shaw's argument that women's full participation in the tradition is revealed through Tantric literature. Thus Shaw adopts an unstable foundation for her argument about to the role of women in the practices of the tradition.

Shaw resists questions of the historical accuracy of experience in favour of her assumption that literature, from which we derive knowledge regarding the feelings and motivations of female practitioners, could not have been created in isolation of women:

> Although the *tantras* are gynocentric texts in which women are often the subjects of the discussion, it does not follow that women were the impassive objects of male observation or subjugation. I argue that since these texts were not created by men in isolation of women, they do not

[11] *Realization of Reality Through Its Bodily Expressions* (Skt. *Vyaktabhāvānugata-tattva-siddhi*). This text is attributed to Sahajayoginīcintā in Bhatacharyya's *An Introduction to Buddhist Esoterism* (1964, 77) and

> express exclusively male views. These views grew out of communal exploration and practice and proceed from the insights of both men and women. (36)

For example, *Realization of Reality through Its Bodily Expressions*, the text attributed to Sahajayoginīcintā, convinces Shaw that its female author was an expert in Tantric teaching and that she served as a teacher to others. Thus, "if women were sought out for their expertise on the inner yogas and Tantric union, it logically follows that women might have helped to create them" (180). In this way, she relies on the experiences of women as revealed through literature, experiences in both the creation and dissemination of religious teaching, to disprove traditional accounts of Tantra that pushed women to the margins of religious life. Experience and the evidence derived from the documentation of experience, proves to Shaw that women were in fact subjects of their own religious lives.

According to Scott, "the project of making experience visible precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself" (1991, 779). Yet relying on the authority of experience pervades models of historical analysis, where "seeing is the origin of knowing [and] writing is reproduction, transmission – the communication of knowledge gained through experience" (776). A similar trend is active in feminist scholarship in religion. Often referred to as the search for a "usable past," many feminist theologians look to a tradition's history with hopes of making women's otherwise hidden experiences visible (Christ and Plaskow, 132). Scott maintains that inquiries rooted in experience "lose the possibilities of examining those assumptions and practices that excluded considerations of differences in the first place," that is, historians (and I add to this scholars of religion) ignore questions regarding the very construction of that

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in George N. Roerich's translation of *The Blue Annals* (1942, 856-857).

experience, "about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place" (777). In response, Scott calls for scholars to historicize experience – to make visible the *processes* that construct experiences in the first place. She relies on the work of Gayatri Spivak to develop a model of historical analysis in which the constructed experience of the subject is considered. In her essay "Literary Representations of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World" (1988), Spivak asks whether historians can do more than assign subject-positions: "The production of historical accounts is the discursive narration of events. When historiography is self-consciously 'non-theoretical' it sees its task, with respect to rival historical accounts of the same period, as bringing forth 'what really happened' in a value-neutral prose" (241). "That history deals with real events and literature with imagined ones," she continues, "may now be seen as a difference in degree rather than in kind" (243). Hayden White, in "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact" (1998) makes a similar observation. He argues that "there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented* as *found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (16, emphasis original).

History and the documentation of experience are thus subject to the same deconstructive critical reading that literature must endure. As Scott suggests,

> It ought to be possible for historians (as for the teachers of literature Spivak so dazzlingly exemplifies) to 'make visible' the assignment of subject positions, not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and

> changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced, and which processes themselves are unremarked and indeed achieve their effect because they are not noticed. (792)

Her emphasis on the processes that construct experience and subsequent rejection of the historical subject as it exists unscathed in most histories of difference is challenged by Laura Lee Downs (1993). She wonders where the historical subject – the agent – exists in Scott's model, that is, has Scott deconstructed the category "woman" so much so that there are no human subjects left to act? I imagine that Shaw would similarly resist the potential loss of the historical subject. Her own theoretical approach to the study of women in Tantra is explicitly informed by an assumption that women were active subjects in their religious lives. One of her primary concerns is to "concentrate upon how women acted rather than how they were acted upon and to consider how women viewed events rather than how women were viewed" (11). She makes this choice in response to traditional readings of Tantric literature and it is the foundation of her analysis. Thus Shaw's theoretical model seems to reject Scott's project altogether.

Downs challenges Scott's theory to account for the experiences of women in history, the women, according to Downs, who are lost in Scott's deconstructive analysis of gender and experience. In her essay, "If 'Woman' is Just an Empty Category, Then Why am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject" (1993), Downs focuses on Scott's discussion of gender as a constructed category and argues that

> lurking at the heart of Scott's call to recognize gender as a 'useful category' of analysis lies a radical attack on the naïve suppositions of all

> previous feminist scholarship: a rejection of that ingenuous chain of reasoning which links subjectivity and experience to the hope that oppressed persons, too, might find some agency in history. (414)

Thus, "the problem is how we conceive of the historical subject as a knowing being and how we understand what kinds of knowledge are available to her" (419). On the one hand, "the deconstructive approach allows Scott to demonstrate how a range of texts artificially stabilizes the primary binary opposition of male and female" (421). Yet, what about situating a text in context? According to Downs, Scott's choices seem arbitrary: "Scott is more concerned with gender as a metaphor for power than with gender as a lived and labile social relation" (424). In response to Downs, Scott (1993) argues that "deconstruction exposes the contradictions and instabilities inherent in existing categories. These contradictions and instabilities then expose hitherto hidden operations of power" (440). Ultimately, theory "analyses how knowledge is produced; theory does not produce either real life or practical politics" (438). Going back to her essay "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" (1986), Scott's motivation for understanding gender as a "constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" as opposed to serving only as a synonym for women and those areas traditionally associated with women (1057), is a political one. According to Scott, gender does not "carry with it a necessary statement about inequality" when it is limited to the world of women's "experiences" (1056). Thus while Scott's initial analysis is concerned not with practical politics, it seems to be included in both her motivation and future goals.

A necessary element of Scott's proposal is that the historical "woman" to whom we have access is only accessible when "she" is approached from the perspective of

cultural discourses. If we return to Marsha Hewitt's essay on ideology critique in the study of religion (1999), we can see how some feminist models of analysis have minimized this critical perspective, not by denying the influence of discourse on a religious tradition, but by suggesting that there is a "true" form of the tradition that exists prior to external influences and cultural processes (such as sexism or misogyny). Citing the work of Rita Gross, Hewitt challenges her preference for studying religion "as non-reducible to its cultural matrix" (Gross 1993, 316): "to argue, as Gross does, that religions occupies some ontological position beyond culture is incoherent" (Hewitt 53). Yet Gross' theoretical perspective is grounded in a notion that the essence or core teachings of a tradition occupy a sort of prediscursive space. For example, in a discussion of the feminine and masculine principles in Tibetan Tantra, Gross argues that "in general, the feminist critique of [Vajrayana] Buddhism finds more fuel in the traditional social and institutional fabric of Buddhism than in Buddhism's theoretical formulations" (Gross 1987, 80). Karma Lekse Tsomo offers similar conclusions:

> However egalitarian the Buddha's original teachings may have been, today preconceptions about the inferiority of women prevail in Buddhist cultures. Although these attitudes may trace to patriarchal social moves with *no verifiable connection to Buddhist tenets* ... unfortunately, social and political factors have intruded and compromised many ordinary women's spiritual potential. (1999, 22, emphasis added)

Such analyses often also suggest that this original manifestation of the tradition, the tradition as it *should* exist, can be accessed at any point by way of an understanding of the tradition's authentic experience. It is for this reason that many feminist scholars have

sought a "usable past" from which to derive an understanding of a religious tradition as it existed prior to cultural influences.

At the heart of Shaw's analysis of Tantric Buddhism is a belief that we have access to these true ideologies of Tantra through the description of the experiences of early Tantric practitioners – experiences Shaw has helped to make visible through her efforts in *Passionate Enlightenment*. From this perspective, any practice, text, or institution which is not in line with Tantra's gender ideology and subsequent worship of women, is not the *true* Tantra. Like Tsomo, Shaw argues that the authentic Tantric tradition could not support the subordination of women or restrictions on their practice because to do so would be in opposition to the tradition's own teaching. Obstacles to women's spiritual practice, then, have come from outside the tradition. How do we have access to the authentic tradition? In Shaw's view it is the experience of men and women as expressed in texts such as Sahajayoginīcintā's *Realization of Reality Through Its Bodily Expressions*, through which we gain access. She argues that

> there are no doctrinal barriers to women's complete participation in Tantric Buddhism. There are no pronouncements of women's disability, innate incapacity, or inferiority to men in the pursuance of enlightenment. The misogynist diatribes that figure in so many religious literatures have no place here. Therefore, any discrimination to which women may have been subjected in the long and varied history of this tradition cannot be attributed to Tantric doctrine but must be sought in cultural forces, institutional factors, and social patterns that have eclipsed the original vision. (199)

Shaw stands behind this perspective particularly in questions of women's exploitation in their roles as consorts. She rejects traditional accounts of Tantric sexual relationships where the female consort is considered nothing more than a necessary prop in the male Tantrics religious progress (7). Instead she argues that in the cases where women have been exploited by their male partners, that Tantra – authentic Tantra – could not have been the motivation for sexual practice. In the course of her research, for example, she did encounter instances of teachers and gurus taking advantage of women and who allowed "the general reputation of Tantra to lend an aura of legitimacy to their seductions;" however, a closer inspection of the circumstances "revealed that the man in question was not knowledgeable about Tantric teachings regarding sexual yoga and that the partners did not consider themselves to be practicing Tantra" (262, n69).

Why does Shaw not consider this possibility in her readings of the *siddha* narratives, particularly with regards to Ghantapa's consort? Why does she trust that the experience of Ghantapa and his consort as expressed through sacred literature is authentic, while at the same time dismissing contemporary sexual exploitation in Tantric relationship as a warped interpretation of Tantra's core teaching? Instead of considering the possibility that Ghantapa's consort was exploited (just as women today are exploited by men claiming to practice sexual yoga), Shaw accepts the narratives' account of religious experience and celebrates the consort's religious achievement, since, in accordance with the "true" tradition, the relationship between Ghantapa and his consort would (or should?) have been mutually liberative. It is in this way that Shaw relies on the authority of experience in order to accept that the story of Ghantapa and his consort gives us access to the authentic experience of Tantra, or, Tantra as it should be. This

perspective informs Shaw's entire project in such a way that the idealized images of women become authentic representations of the *true* tradition and are thus not subject to the type of critical scrutiny that an analysis of gender demands.

Gender as a Constitutive Element

Tim Murphy (2000) argues that a text must be understood by the scholar of religion to "be a product of something that cannot be said strictly to reside within the text, but rather within which the text itself resides," where the texts, as an ensemble of other discourses, are made irreducibly plural (397). In this way, the "woman" of Tantric literature also resides within a multiplicity of voices. Thus to search for authenticity through a single cause, influence, or authorial voice behind a given textual image is to overlook the discourses and exchanges that have combined together to create idealized images of the feminine principle, as we see in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*, and of so-called historical women, as seen in the sacred narratives of the *Siddha* stories and examples of pure vision. Shaw privileges women's "experience" of Tantra as it is available to us in sacred literature and she accepts the tradition's teachings on the feminine as reflections of these so-called experiences. That is, in order for Shaw to make a case for the historical position of female practitioners, she must have the foundation of experience on which to rely. Yet as I have argued, the category of experience, like gender, is itself unstable. A critical analysis of gender, then, not only identifies the "women" of Tantric literature, but asks how these "women" came to be. As Scott argues,"[t]he emphasis on 'how' suggests a study of processes, not of origins, of multiple rather than single causes, of rhetoric or discourse rather than ideology or consciousness. It does not abandon attention to structures and institutions [...]" (1999, 4).

To accept, as Shaw does, the subject-positions assigned in Tantric literature, is to overlook the many processes active in the construction of the category "woman." Scott's definition of gender as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" (1986, 1067), can serve as a model through which we can begin to identify these processes. I will return again to some of Shaw's examples in *Passionate Enlightenment* in order to identify how the "women" Shaw has discovered in the literature are themselves constituted by the interrelationship of cultural symbols, normative concepts through which such symbols are viewed, and the social institutions and structures which inform the tradition's symbols and values[12]. "Subsequent history is written," Scott argues, "as if these normative positions were the product of social consensus rather than of conflict" (1986, 1068). Shaw accepts without question that the idealized images of women in Tantric literature came to be as a product of consensus; instead I suggest that the tradition's idealized images of women are born from the complex relationships of competing discourses. First, I recommend an alternative reading of the story of Bhiksunī Laksmī, an Indian Buddhist nun turned Tantric practitioner. Whereas Shaw takes her story as a standard of women's involvement in the tradition, when her story is viewed from the perspective of the marginalization of Buddhist nuns in India and Tibet, Laksmī's story seems to be an exception. Second, I turn to the *yab-yum* symbol of sexual union in order to illustrate how Scott's model of the interrelationship of symbols, values, structures, and institutions in the construction of gender challenges

[12] Scott includes the construction of the subjective identity alongside symbols, normative concepts, and institutions in her definition of gender as a constitutive element; however, such an analysis would require a careful psychoanalytic critique that I am not equipped to offer in this thesis. For a discussion of the development of identity within Tantra, see June Campbell's *Traveller in Space* (1996).

Shaw's understanding of the symbol. Within the framework of this analytical model, historical figures and Tantric images are subject to the same critical scrutiny.

Shaw identifies practices and texts that have been attributed to historical female practitioners in an attempt to establish a standard of women's contribution to the tradition. One such example is the story of Bhiksunī Laksmī and the Avalokitesvara Fasting Practice (126-130). This practice is attributed to Laksmī in George Roerich's translation of *The Blue Annals*: "The Degree of propitiating Ārya Avalokitesvara by performing the rite of fasting was preached by the nun Laksmī (dPalmo) personally blessed by Ārya Avalokitesvara. She taught it to the pandita Ye-ses zan-po (Jnānabhadra), blessed by her" (1007-1008). Shaw retells the biography of Laksmī as Sherry Ortner has recorded it during her fieldwork in Nepal,[13] and the description of her life as a nun and her time spent in the forest is recorded only in Ortner's documentation of the oral tradition. While Shaw sees the story of Laksmī as evidence of both women's full participation on the religious path and of a larger gender ideology that supports women's practice, if we accept Scott's definition of gender, we cannot move forward with the example of Bhiksunī Laksmī without considering, for example, how her story resides within the reality of women's access to religious training.

Bhiksunī Laksmī was a Kashmiri princess of the tenth or eleventh century, who turned to a religious life when she discovered that animals were being killed for food.

> Overcoming the opposition of her parents, the princess became a fully ordained nun and then apprenticed herself to a Tantric guru. Laksmī became extremely skilled at logical debate, so her guru ordered her to

[13] At the time of *Passionate Enlightenment*, Ortner had not yet published her research and Shaw cites the typed manuscript (Shaw, 236, n97).

> debate the leading philosophers and Tantric scholars of the day. When she defeated one after another, Laksmī was installed as abbess of a monastery and held this position for many years, until she contracted leprosy. (Shaw, 126)

Laksmī was ordered out of the monastery and it was while she lay dying in a cave that Avalokitesvara appeared to her, healed her leprosy, and revealed to her a fasting practice "as a powerful method of merit accumulation" (127). She later returned to the monastery and instructed both the monastics and the lay community on the practice of fasting for Avalokitesvara. The practice still exists today, according to Shaw, in any place where Buddhism is practiced.

If, as Snellgrove suggests, many Tantric practitioners were often first followers of the monastic codes prior to abandoning this monastic path for Tantric practice (186, 307), how did women break through the initial barriers of the monastic order? If Tantra developed in the period after the nuns order had virtually disappeared, as Nancy Auer Falk (1989) suggests, where did women learn the initial practice? For instance, if we go back to the story of the *Siddha* Ghantapa, it tells us that he had been practicing the vows and orders of the monastic life for lifetimes, and in his final life (before entering the *dakinī* paradise) he "took the vows of a monk [...] and did not transgress them" (Robinson, 174). Similarly, other *siddhas* follow this pattern: Jayānanda was a Brahman priest (191) prior to becoming a Tantric *siddha*; Karnaripa was a "master of all the monks" at the monastery of Srī Nālandā (86); and Kānhapa "was a monk of the vihāra of Somapurī" (81). In total, eighteen of the eight-four *siddhas* were monks or Brahmans[14].

[14] According to Robison's translations, Virūpa, Sāntipa, Nāgārjuna, Kānhapa, Karnaripa, Tilopa, Bhusuku, Dharmapa, and Ghantapa lived as monks; Saraha, Bhadrapa, Kukkuripa, Dharmapa, Jālandhari, Pankaja,

In this way, these male practitioners had committed time to practice and had had access to the extensive Buddhist (or Hindu, in some cases) training, in such areas as doctrine and meditation, that are to come before the final stages of the Tantric path. The four female *siddhas* in Robinson's translation of Abhayadatta's narration of the lives of the *siddhas* have no formal monastic training in Buddhist doctrine or practice. The closest a female *siddha* comes to formal training is the princess Laksmīnkarā, who "learned doctrines from the great siddha Kamabala and she knew many of the Tantric collections" (251). As I introduced in the second chapter, the women of Tantric literature are portrayed as having a very passive role in the Tantric practices and relationships in that they are always already "by nature" the epitome of wisdom and ready to receive the active principle embodied by the male practitioner. If we return to Ghantapa's consort, her virginal body was the requirement for her ability to practice sexual yoga, in direct contrast to Ghantapa's monastic and religious training. Thus, the *siddha* narratives suggest two things: monastic or formal training is a beneficial foundation for the more advanced Tantric path and the female *siddha* seems to have had more limited access to this training. Shaw's reading of the *siddha* narratives disregards the frequency with which *siddhas* enter Tantric practice once they are well versed in Buddhist doctrine on account of their time spent within various monastic institutions. Instead, she argues that the

> social marginality and loose organization of the Tantric movement in medieval India enabled women to participate freely in the revelation process. In absence of formal barriers to their participation, women had the same access to visionary experience through their practice of

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Lucika, Nāgabodhi, and Vyali were Brahmans (as Brahmans, religious education was essential); and Jayānanda was a Brahman priest.

> meditation and subtle yogas, and they wielded authority on the basis of that experience rather than through ordination or clerical office. (Shaw, 102)

While Shaw sees no "formal barriers" to women's participation in Tantra, an examination of the history of the nuns' order suggests otherwise.

While the order (*sangha)* of monks was still flourishing in India in 1198, the year of the Turkish invasion, the community of nuns had disappeared. Falk (1989) distinguishes between three periods in Indian Buddhist history in order to trace the development and disappearance of their community. The first period begins with the Buddha in the sixth century BCE, when the new community of Buddhist practitioners was drawing people from all areas of life (157). The Buddha founded orders for both monks and nuns, though the nuns were subject to eight special rules in combination with the *Vinaya* code that applied to both orders. One such rule ensured that even the most senior nun was subordinate to the most novice monk (Barua, 62). Yet despite these additional restrictions, Falk finds evidence that the order of nuns developed into a quite a large community, and continued to do so into the next stage of Buddhism in India. Beginning with the reign of Asoka (272 BCE) and continuing through the third century, the monastic community, both monks and nuns, gained significant popular support. According to Falk, "nuns seem to have been both numerous and wealthy," and we can find documentation of their participation both through donor inscriptions on buildings and Buddhist monuments and the frequency with which nuns are mentioned in the literature of that time period (157). The third period is the best recorded period in Buddhist history, yet there is an almost complete absence of nuns in the records and

"none of the famous philosophical treatises and commentaries that made the period so illustrious are attributed to nuns" (157). Between the fourth and twelfth centuries, the order of nuns seems to have disappeared entirely. The last recorded gift from a nun was in 550 CE (158). Falk looks also to the documentation of Buddhist life in India as recorded by the Chinese pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang, who travelled throughout India in the fourth and seventh century respectively, and finds that both mention a nun only once in their description of monastic life (158). For example, Fa Hsien notes that nuns "make offerings at the pagoda of Ananda, because it was he who begged the World-Honoured One to allow women to become nuns" (Giles, 23). At this same pagoda, he observes that "novices of both sexes" make offerings to Rāhula, the son of the Buddha (23). Fa Hsien refers to nuns a second time, however, the reference is quite vague: "Counting priests and nuns [in Sankisa], there are here about one thousand" (26). The other single reference to a nun comes from a story from the time of the Buddha.

Falk suggests that the community of nuns disappeared as a result of economic hardship across Buddhist centres in India. The immense popular support that the monastic order enjoyed in the second period dissipated and although financial support came later in the form of royal patronage, it was directed primarily at the monks. She finds that support came to those who brought prestige to the royal court, often in the form of philosophical debates, however, "the nuns were at a decided disadvantage, for their community had never enjoyed the lion's share of prestige. If the men's and women's communities had to compete for donations, there was no doubt that the men would capture the greater share of support" (158). The lower profile of the nuns during this time in Indian history is most

likely a result of the additional restrictions on their community. While Falk argues that the eight special rules for nuns had little impact on their spiritual path,

> [t]he damage inflicted by the special rules was of a subtler and worldlier nature. The discriminatory provisions meant that women would never be leaders in the life of the whole community or have any decisive voice in shaping its direction . . . [it] affirmed that the monks were the more significant and worthier part of such a community. (160).

In this way, women, as nuns, were pushed to the margins of the Indian Buddhist monastic structure and thus entering Tantric practice from a monastic background, as so many of the Tantric *siddhas* did, would have been virtually impossible for women in India at that time. Within the culture of a vanishing community of nuns, the example of Bhiksunī Laksmī appears to be an exception, not a standard.

The secondary status of nuns continues today in contemporary Buddhist communities. Nancy J. Barnes (1996) notes that women in Tibet remain permanent novices because the monastic institution in Tibet has yet to recognize an official order of nuns. Unless these women travel to a country such as China, where female ordination is permitted, Tibetan women maintain a permanent secondary status within the larger community of fully ordained Tibetan men (273). Just as the Buddhist population in medieval India seems to have favoured the male monastics by way of financial support, Buddhist nuns (and novices) in Tibet receive almost no financial support. Consequently, the nuns have virtually no access to expensive higher education in Buddhist philosophy and logic and are thus limited in the manner by which they contribute to the larger tradition. In this way, women are "stuck on a low rung on the religious ladder in their

country, even though they were recognized as ordained women" (274). Tsomo (1999) observes that "women as well as men tend to support men's religious institutions far more than they support women's. Such patterns of support seem to indicate an underlying assumption that men's practice is intrinsically more valuable than women's" (180). An investigation into Tantra's gender ideology, then, is incomplete when it does not consider the role institutions have played in the construction of the tradition's "woman." Unfortunately, Shaw's model of analysis bypasses any consideration of these factors.

Just as Laksmī's story must be located within the historical context of Indian Buddhist values as they are reflected in monastic structures, the images of male and female deities in sexual union (*yab-yum*) do not exist in a vacuum. Central to Shaw's understanding of Tantra's gender ideology, this symbol of sexual union is intricately connected to Tantra's many teachings and practices, both acknowledged and hidden, that inform the "women" whom Shaw has discovered in her analysis. Yet Shaw's analysis begins and ends with an idealized image, where a text, such as the *Candamahārosana-tantra* or the *Cakrasamvara-tantra*, which outlines the theory and practice of sexual yoga, dictates the very interpretation of the symbol itself.

Scott suggests that symbols "evoke multiple (and contradictory) meanings" (1986, 1067). If we begin with the *yab-yum* as a symbol, our inquiry should direct us to ask who created the image, for whom was it constructed, and in what Tantric practice was it used. For instance, Eva Neumaier-Dargyay (1995) notes that the authors of the Buddhist "canon" wrote formal philosophical texts as well as literature intended for the lay reader (145-146). In "Buddhist Thought from a Feminist Perspective", she suggests that "if we consider these texts, we get a wealth of information regarding how the authors of the

canon *wanted the Buddhist layman to consider woman* [...]" (146, emphasis added). Thus Tantric literature must also be considered as a source of constructed knowledge, that is, a medium through which specific ideas regarding women are expressed through symbols and teachings. Basham (1959), in a study of the Indian caste system, makes a similar argument: "The texts [...] were written by the brāhmans and from the brāhmanic point of view, and represent conditions as the brāhmans would have liked them to be" (138). For instance, Shaw relies heavily on the writings of Tsong-kha-pa in order to develop her understanding of the Tantric sexual relationship (169-170, 172). Tsong-kha-pa, a scholar and founder of the *dGe-lugs-pa* order in Tibet (Snellgrove, 488), is both a creator of Tantric literature and part of an androcentric monastic institution. In this way, his discussion of the *yab-yum* symbol must be understood in light of Neumaier-Dargyay's and Basham's observations on the constructed nature of religious teachings – that is, through Tsong-kha-pa's writing come the voices of the institution. If Falk is correct in her speculations on the history of Buddhist nuns, then we also find that the discourses on the role of females in sexual yoga, where the female is to be honoured and served, come from within the same institutional structures that maintain discourses on the secondary status of female monastics.

Shaw dismisses the influence of male monastic culture on Tantric doctrine and practice when she argues that the original tradition (the "authentic" tradition) was primarily a product of the lay community. Yet as the *siddha* narratives reveal, the development of Tantra was not isolated to a community of lay practitioners. Similarly, a recent study by Gregory Schopen, *Bones, Stones, and Buddhist Monks* (1997), suggests that the rise in popularity of deity worship in Indian Buddhism (specifically late

Mahāyāna and Tantra)[15] cannot be attributed solely to a development in lay Buddhist practice. According to Schopen, despite the common belief that the laity or the "common" people brought deity worship into the Buddhist tradition, if one looks to the inscriptions on the first sculptured images of these deities one finds that the majority of the sculptures were donated by the monastic community, thus documenting "the role of the Indian Buddhist monastics in this process" (240):

> It starts with the assumption [...] that Indian Buddhism was a religion dominated by a religious elite. But then it almost immediately asserts that these 'enlightened elites' were apparently only able to react: change and innovation were the result of the pressure of popular, lay feeling; it was the laity, it seems, who stimulated change and innovation [...] yet every indication that we have in regard to the cult of images, for example, suggests something like the opposite. (240)

These observations do not disprove Shaw's analysis outright, but they do challenge one of the primary assumptions in her own reading of Tantric literature – that Tantra's valuation of women and worship of female deities developed only within the lay community of tantrics and outside the androcentric control of the male monastic institution. In this way, Shaw argues, the voices of the texts represent not the male voice of the historical Buddhist institution, but the voices of practitioners: if the monastic community, comprised primarily of male practitioners, had little to do with Tantra, then the lay community out of which the movement was born, must have included women, since it is unimaginable to her that women were also excluded from the lay community.

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[15] For a description of the increased deity worship in Tantra, see Snellgrove's *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism* (1987, 189-198).

If we return to Scott's understanding of gender as an analytic category, we must seek to understand the "normative concepts that set forth interpretations of the meanings of the symbols, that attempt to limit and contain their metaphoric possibilities" (1986, 1067). We must examine the *yab-yum* symbol in light of the tradition's values as expressed in both literatures and practices. As Ellen Goldberg (2002) rightly points out, the *yab-yum* image "represents a subtle and powerful symbolic form that functions nonetheless as the repository of cultural roles, hierarchies, and metaphysical ideas" (129). First, the image of the *yab-yum* must be examined from the perspective of textual instructions to worship women as embodiments of the wisdom principle. I have already suggested, by way of examples from the *Candamahārosana-tantra*, that these instructions to honour women appear to serve the male yogi's path, and like Basham's observations on the role of the brāhmans in the development of the Indian caste system, we must ask how Tantric teachings on sexual union reflected the needs and views of male practice. If the *Candamahārosana-tantra* instructs male practitioners on how to achieve *siddhi* through a female consort, how did the *yab-yum* symbol serve to challenge or enforce this Tantric ideal? Shaw is reluctant to concede that the image expresses anything other than the complementarity of the relationship between male and female practitioners. "The language used to describe Tantric union," she suggests, "is not a vocabulary of domination or exploitation. It is a language of symmetry, complementarity, and interdependence" (173-174). She continues to argue that when the *yab-yum* image is viewed from the perspective of the teachings in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*,

> [o]ne can imagine the man's behavior by watching it from the woman's perspective, and one can imagine a women's experience of the respect and

> worship required of the man. Since the process being described is one that two people undergo together, both poles are implicitly and tangibly present and can easily be deduced from any description of it. The relationship between Tantric partners is one of mutual aspiration, effort, and assistance. (174)

However, it is necessary still to push one's analysis to consider how the symbol reflects other interpretations of the instructions to worship women. If male practitioners are instructed on how to gain success from union with a female consort, are we to believe that the *yab-yum*, the visual representation of this union, represents more than a reflection of male practice? Shaw interprets both the instructions to worship women and symbol as evidence of women's equal role in the Tantric relationship. I have already suggested that Shaw misreads the call to respect and honour women in the *Candamahārosana-tantra*. Thus, if the instructions serve the needs of male practice, the symbol can be viewed from the perspective that it too enforces a subordinate position for female practitioners.

Second, we must examine the *yab-yum* symbol in light of Tantric practice in order to determine if Shaw's vision of sexual union as a theory of partnership of equals is supported in the everyday world of Tantra . If we look to the Tibetan Tantric tradition,[16] for instance, we find that female practitioners are virtually invisible within the monastic institutions. Just as the community of nuns in Tibet experiences a secondary status next to the male community, the institutional structure of Tibetan Buddhism is dominated by male lamas and practitioners. June Campbell (1996) observes that the primary role of the male lama "ensured that notions of male superiority were embedded in all aspects of

[16] While Shaw aims to document the history of Tantra in India, her reliance on Tibetan sources and practitioners, such as Tsong-kha-pa, opens the door for an analysis of Tantra as it was practiced in Tibet.

Tibetan life" (69). Similarly, she points to the *tulku* system, the system through which male lamas take rebirth into the next life, as an example of a monastic structure which pushes women to the distant margins. Since it is assumed that a lama will always take rebirth as a male, "the tulku system relied on the body of the mother, not as a participant in the power structures, but as a subsidiary element to the process" (90). Yet the Tibetan tradition continues to elevate the image of male and female in union as one of its primary meditative tools. If Shaw is correct in her view that the *yab-yum* is an image born from the relationships of male and female practitioners, where male yogis respect and worship women as the embodiment of wisdom, why are women barred from positions within the institution?

If, as Shaw argues, women make up one half of the enlightened *yab-yum* couple, one would expect that the physical practice of sexual union should reflect this partnership. This does not appear to be the case in the Tibetan tradition. Campbell examines the roles of women in Tantric sexual relationships and finds that, upon entering these partnerships, women become the *songyum*, or secret sexual partner. "The purpose of the secret songyum," she suggests, "was in the context of the monastic establishment, to provide for male practitioners the opportunities for sexual activity, without the disruption of the structures of the system" (97). Furthermore

> It begs the question, in the absence of actual commentaries by live women on their practices with actual men within the tradition, where are the living female masters of the Tantra in the Tibetan tradition, and if they exist, why must the woman's position, name, and commentary be kept secret? (99)

If women occupy a visible role in sexual yoga in the religious imagination, why is this image not supported by everyday practice? Shaw accepts without question that the *yab-yum* image reflects the practice of real women and men, yet one cannot find a single reference to a living female Tantric practitioner in *Passionate Enlightenment*. Without the tangible support from Tantric practice, Shaw's conclusions fall short. While she offers endless examples of the practice of sexual yoga as it is expressed in literature, such examples are problematic because her conclusions regarding the sexual relationship between male and female practitioners are thus dictated by the idealized image alone. Shaw is content to assume that the relationship between Ghantapa and his consort, for example, was a relationship of mutual respect and honour because this is the *ideal* relationship. "The practice of union," Shaw argues, "*at least as it was originally designed*, was not inherently meant to be an exploitative process from which one person – the man – derived unreciprocated benefit" (173, emphasis added). She thus presupposes the same "reality" for both idealized image and female practitioner.

I have offered these examples in order to illustrate how the idealized images of women and of the feminine principle can be deconstructed in such as way that weakens their potential to serve as the foundation of Shaw's analysis. Rosemary Tong (1989) defines deconstruction as the act of being "critical of certain ideas or social injustices as well as the structures upon which these are based" (219). In this way, the teachings and images available through Tantric literature must be challenged so as to locate their positions in cultural discourses and structures. I suggest that with Scott's understanding of gender as a constitutive element, we can begin to identify the many components of each gendered ideal. Thus, Shaw's reliance on a so-called historical figure such as

Bhiksunī Laksmī, or the historical significance of the *yab-yum*, must be scrutinized in light of the normative structures through which these images are viewed. I have suggested also that Shaw's inability to challenge these idealized images is a result of her dependence on "experience" as a category of analysis. It is because Shaw accepts Tantric records as descriptions of authentic experiences that she is able to overlook the roles these many teachings, instructions, and narratives played in the construction of the Tantric "woman." To rely on experience in this way precludes, as Scott rightly observes, an understanding of the processes that construct the subjects of our analyses.

Conclusions

In *Passionate Enlightenment* Miranda Shaw challenges scholars to examine women's roles in Tantric history through the lens of the Tantra's own celebration of women's status in the tradition:

> Most Western scholars have interpreted this ancient and living tradition by projecting models of gender and sexuality that preexist in their own minds, without reference to the tradition's own values. To continue to use a vocabulary of domination is to remain locked in this realm of discourse, losing sight of the fact that Tantric texts eloquently present a unique universe of visionary experience – a universe that bears little resemblance to the modern Western epistemologies and ontologies that have been invoked in its interpretation. The colors in this world cannot be perceived through a lens that reduces them all to a black-and-white pattern of manipulation and subjugation, or domination and submission. (177).

In this way, according to Shaw, we cannot continue to study Tantra with an assumption that women's roles were marginal or secondary to the roles of male practitioners, because Tantra's "universe" dictates a world free of domination, where the religious imagination supported both women's and men's flourishing practice. Her analysis of the tradition's teachings and images, however, is argued from the perspective of a new Tantric *history*. I have argued that Shaw's examination of Tantra's gender ideology, and subsequent conclusions on women's historical practice, is founded on an analysis of the tradition's own idealized images, and thus produces neither a history nor a critical analysis of gender.

Shaw's thorough critique of the traditional androcentric framework through which Tantra has been examined in the past has directed our attention toward the women of Tantra, particularly in the form of texts attributed to women and elaborate teachings on the role of the feminine principle in Tantric practice. Nevertheless, these "men" and "women" of Tantric literature must not be confused with the male and female practitioners of Tantric history. In her search for evidence of women's contributions to the Tantric tradition, Shaw has conflated an analysis of Tantra's gender ideology with the construction of a new sacred history. Shaw's alternative history of women in the Tantric tradition results from an assumption that women *must* have participated in the tradition, and this assumption is often drawn from a selective reading of the *tantras* and sacred literature. Thus her search for a usable Tantric past has resulted in the substitution of the idealized images of women for evidence of the status of historical female practitioners.

Instead, an examination of the status of women in Tantric history must be undertaken from the perspective that the idealized images presented to us in Tantric literature are constructed ideals born out of multiple competing discourses. Thus, Tantric teachings and images must be scrutinized in light of cultural values, structures, and institutions that extend beyond the confines of the "authentic" Tantric tradition. I have tried to illustrate how Shaw's model of analysis fails to provide historical evidence for women's participation within the tradition; at the same time I have argued for a new model of analysis that incorporates an understanding of gender which considers how categories of "woman" and "feminine" have been informed by religious and cultural discourse. This perspective has challenged theoretical models across disciplines to consider how the construction of the "feminine" has determined the ways in which

"women" are represented in literature and religious texts. Furthermore, it alerts scholars to the challenges inherent in making statements regarding women in history based on these gendered images.

In this thesis I have demonstrated that an analysis of gender is, as Joan Scott suggests, an analysis into the production of knowledge about the world. Randi R. Warne (2000) observes that "there is no neutral, self-evident rendering of gender. Each gender ideology is at some level a decision about how the world is to be configured and understood, establishing normative social, political and cultural parameters and possibilities for how human life might be lived" (148-149). Consequently, in an examination into the roles of women in Tantra, the subject of our investigation becomes larger, more complex, and often does not resemble the "women" for whom we are initially searching.

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